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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RIVER THROUGH THE BADLANDS

BY

RALPH D. WITTEN

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
FALL, 1987

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled River Through the Badlands submitted by Ralph D. Witten in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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(Supervisor)

P. A. Schouls

....

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Date: Oct. 8, 1987

for Grenda

ABSTRACT

In her essay "The Teaching of Literature," Flannery O'Connor says that fiction should "embody mystery through manners." The mystery, she says, "is the mystery of our position on earth, and the manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery."

The nine stories in this collection focus on the manners and conventions of contemporary Canadians. Whether it is Leo going to church in "Cats Night," or Jenny, Donald, and Meg sitting in a bar in "Tumbling," or Marcia and Greg driving from Vancouver to Edmonton in "The Fifth Wheel," the characters in these stories are struggling with everyday concerns. But it is always a struggle that includes mystery, although the characters' recognition of that mystery may, at times, be slight.

When an individual is suddenly, unexpectedly confronted with mystery, however, his or her daily life takes on new shape and new meaning. The mystery lurking just below the manners cannot be ignored; it must be accepted or rejected. The mystery of hope, the mystery of grace, the mystery of an individual's "position on earth" are mysteries beyond him or her, and yet they are mysteries that lie within the individual's actions, thoughts, and words.

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Cats Night

Wednesday night was Cats Night, and every Cats Night Leo and his friends played a game called knock-door-ginger. "Cats" was what everybody called Catechism, and Catechism was weekly doctrinal instruction by the church elders and ministers for all youths from ages 13 to about 17 or 18. Leo didn't know of one person who went to Cats who had anything to say about it other than, "Boring".

Leo was thirteen and there were a lot of things he didn't understand, but perhaps the biggest mystery was why did he have to go to Cats? Because his parents said so. Because the church demanded it. Sure. But still, it made no sense to him. The only question of the Heidelberg Catechism that he could remember was part of the first one: "Question: What is your only comfort in life and death? Answer: That I am not my own. . ." That was all he could remember, and it didn't make any sense to him--comfort in not being your own? What did that mean, "I am not my own"? Even when he did learn at least the complete first line, it was simply a concept that he had heard for years, and he couldn't see why he had to memorize it now. "That I am not my own, but belong--body and soul, in life and in death--to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ."

One Sunday during the evening service, Leo was sitting in church counting the square panes of glass in the tall windows. He had already counted one row of panes across and one row down and then multiplied the two numbers to come up with 96. But now he was counting every square to make sure that the multiplication was correct. It wasn't something that he really wanted to do, but it was all he could think of. He was on 66 when his older sister jabbed him with her elbow and then handed him a roll of peppermints. He tried to mark his place on the window before taking the peppermints, but he lost it. Not that it really mattered, he knew he would have counted 96. He took a peppermint and passed the roll on to his brother.

He turned his attention to his favourite subject in church, Karen's long blonde hair. She sat two pews in front of Leo and was two years older than him. Her hair was golden and it tumbled onto the back of the pew so that if you sat directly behind her you'd have to be careful not to put your hand on it when it was time to stand up. Once, in the crowded aisles after the service, Leo tried to get close enough to smell her hair but some of the older guys her age shoved in between and began talking to her.

The sermon seemed to be taking especially long this evening, and Leo wondered if the minister was taking his time because there was a football game on that everyone was dying to watch. It was a quarter-final game between the Edmonton Eskimos and the B.C. Lions, and the last Leo had heard on the car radio driving to church was 21-17 for the Esks in the third quarter. Of course, he and his brothers had begged to stay home from church, but there was no way. Now he noticed that his brothers were getting restless as well, eager to get to the car and maybe catch the last minutes of the game.

Everyone in church knew that old Mr. Nanninga brought a transistor radio to church and listened to the game in the back pew with a small earplug. When Leo asked his mother if he could bring a radio to church, she looked at him with those same eyes he still remembered from a few years ago when he had knocked over a plant in the living room with his baseball bat. But this time he didn't let her fierce eyes scare him. Instead, he said that Mr. Nanninga always brought a radio to church when a game was on so why couldn't he. Then she sighed heavily and said they should be thankful that Mr. Nanninga still came to church at all.

During the doxology Leo's older brother, Nick, got the car keys from their dad and after the minister retreated with the elders downstairs, the boys waited impatiently for the cue to leave their pew--the first note from the organ. As soon as they heard it they were gone, walking as quickly as they dared while trying to feign some sense of reverence. As soon as they got to the back door and out of the sanctuary they tore down the stairs and ran to their car. Nick opened the driver's door and was getting in behind the wheel.

"Forget it, Nick!" Leo said. "You sat there last time."

"Sorry," Nick said, "I got here first."

Leo tried to pull Nick out, but Nick pushed him away and quickly pulled the door shut, almost catching Leo's hand. Leo had to settle for the front seat on the passenger's side. Nick turned on the radio and the boys listened intently. The game was over;

Bryan Hall was going on and on about this player and that player and about B.C.'s offense, but he still didn't say the final score. Leo tried to guess what the outcome was from the tone of Bryan Hall's and the other commentators' voices, but it was impossible to tell for sure. After about five minutes they heard the score: 31-30 for B.C. The Eskimos were out. Leo couldn't believe it. He wanted to cry.

He got out of the front seat and sat in the back where his younger sister and brother were also sitting now. A strange feeling came over him sitting in the cold car on a cold autumn evening, watching the neighbourhood grow darker and darker. He thought about the football stadium and imagined the thousands of people filing out into the busy streets and the bright city lights. He thought about how they must be upset about the game, but then he also thought about how free they were. They could go somewhere--out for dinner to a fancy restaurant--and forget all about the game. They could get in their cars and go wherever they wanted to. But what could he do? It was so much worse to be sitting in your parents' car, waiting for them to finish their gossiping with other members of the congregation. There was nothing to do. Leo watched the streetlights flickering on, and suddenly he wished he didn't have to be stuck in this cold car in a church parking lot, waiting for his mom and dad. He wished something new and different would happen. Yeah, now that he thought about it, why couldn't something new happen? Why did they always have to go to church and miss football games? Why did they always have to sit in the car and wait for their parents after church? He felt a dreadful sense of boredom he had never known before, and suddenly he was hoping for something big to happen. Something really big and sudden that would change their lives forever. What could it be? The second coming of Christ? No, no, that was too big. That would end everything. But it had to be something like that, something big and drastic. He sighed heavily against the window, causing it to fog up and block out the streetlight. And then he began to doodle on the foggy window with his finger. By the time his parents came to the car the church was dark and silent. Leo was glad to be leaving it behind.

But for some reason they were never allowed to be away from church for very long. By Wednesday night Leo was getting ready to go back. His friends Rick and Bruce stopped by his place to pick him up for Cats, which was always held in the church basement. As Leo was letting them in the back porch the family cat sneaked out the door.

"Deafy!" Leo yelled, but the cat was long gone. "Mom, Deafy's gone again."

"Oh, Leo," she said in a complaining tone.

"Well, I'm not going after her. We've got to go," Leo said.

"She'll get into a fight again!"

But Leo pretended not to hear her.

The boys decided to take the long way to church--down 118th avenue where all the shops and restaurants and gas stations were. Along the way Leo explained to Rick and Bruce that their cat was the dumbest animal alive because she never listened--didn't even know her own name--and was always getting into fights with dogs or climbing trees in pursuit of the neighbourhood magpies who did nothing but laugh at her.

"My Dad says a cat is a man's worst enemy," Rick said.

"Give me a dog any day," Bruce said.

When they got to the church they hung around outside with their classmates until the last minute. Then they all slouched into their room, slid down into their chairs, and left their heavy jackets on. The minister said good evening and some of the girls responded. This particular Wednesday the minister talked about pre-destination. As always, he was very solemn which made the kids very solemn and quiet. Leo and his friends discovered that if they sat quiet and pretended to listen they sometimes got let out five minutes early. Besides, the minister didn't exactly encourage spontaneous remarks or opinions of any kind. They each had a book in which there were fifty-two questions and fifty-two answers--one for each week of the year. Whenever he thought about it, which wasn't too often, it always surprised Leo that there were exactly enough questions to fit into the fifty-two weeks of the year. Weren't there other questions to be asked? Didn't new questions come up? It seemed to him that most things usually didn't work out so neat and orderly as the Heidelberg Catechism, but then he remembered that when it came to things about church, different rules applied. Everything about church was orderly and proper. It never changed, and was older than his grandparents--going all the way back to Holland, where it probably started a million years ago--and there was no fun in it.

After Cats, Leo and his friends hunted for fun. Knock-door-ginger. Leo couldn't remember when he first learned the game; it seemed he was born with it. His older brother said the game was as old as the hills. Leo wasn't sure if that was very old, but it sounded good. The idea of the game was to go up to someone's front door, ring the doorbell, and then hide behind a fence or bush and watch the people come to the door, looking around in complete bewilderment for who it might have been. The houses that were the most fun, of course, were the ones where the people got the most upset; you had to get scared or even chased for the game to be any good. That's why the group tended to do the same houses every week, so that the house-dwellers would begin to get suspicious and irritated.

One house they had discovered was almost too good to be true. It was directly across from Leo's home, and the man who lived there got hopping mad every time they rang his doorbell. The first time they did his house the man swung open the front door and when he saw no one was there he checked along both sides of the step and then walked down to the front sidewalk looking both up and down. Leo and his friends, hiding behind a nearby shrub, had to be awfully still, even though they wanted to burst out laughing. It was great fun.

The second time they did the man's house, he came to the door and swung it wide open again. But this time when he saw no one there, he went back inside. The boys were disappointed, and started down the street in search of another house to do. But suddenly they heard a car come barrelling out of the man's front driveway. The boys panicked. They started to run down the sidewalk but soon realized they weren't going to get away that way, so they cut through someone's yard to get into the back alley. They expected the big car to come charging down the alley but they never saw it again that night.

They decided to wait a few weeks before trying the house again, because they were sure the man would be waiting just behind the front door. But eventually they did try it again, and again the man put up a wonderful chase in his car. They did the house again and again and again, each time inviting more of their friends to come along, and each time the man chased them or hunted for them in his car. But he never tried to grab them at the front door; he diligently waited for the bell to ring and then without even checking at the front door he got in his big green car and started after the boys.

This week it was Leo's turn to ring the doorbell. The group wished him luck, and he started off slowly, on tiptoe, for that door. Even though the man never tried to catch the boys at the front door, the boys still weren't a hundred percent sure if that was because they were so sneaky or because the man for some reason didn't want to catch them that way. Leo's body tensed. All he could think about was getting his finger on that bell and then bang! tear across the front lawn back to his friends. He inched up the steps without a sound, slowly, carefully, and then when the bell was in reach he hit it with his open hand and ran. He reached his friends behind the neighbour's fence, and sure enough, in just a few seconds the big green car was backing out of the driveway.

This was about the sixth or seventh time they did the man's house and the group was the largest it had ever been--eleven guys. Leo began to worry that they were getting too big and slow and easy to catch. All eleven of them cut through a nearby yard to get to the dark shelter of an alley. A car was coming down the far end of the alley, near the Esso service station and the kids didn't take any chances--they cut through another yard, a ferocious dog barking in the yard next door. Now they were on 42nd street, one street down from the man's house. They ran to the corner of the block for a better vantage point, but the car was nowhere in sight. The man was getting trickier, no doubt about it.

They walked to the next alley down from 42nd street and began walking down the dark alley. Some of the regulars were convinced that the man had already given up. Someone else suggested that they go to A & W, and it seemed the only thing left to do. They were walking down the alley, between a long block of low-rental row-housing on one side and a large apartment building on the other. When they were about three quarters of a block through the alley they saw headlights just beginning to turn into the lane. "Over the fence!" someone yelled, and before the headlights were shining directly down the lane all the kids were over the small fence on their left, flat on their stomachs in a small garden, hiding under rhubarb leaves and cornstalks. The car came slowly towards them. Leo felt he was breathing so loud that he tried to hold his breath.

Rick's foot was on his hand but he didn't dare move it. The car was right beside them now. Leo looked through a crack in ~~the~~ fence and he could see the man's dark, heavy face through the open car window. Suddenly the face turned and seemed to be staring right at Leo--a flash of black eyes and square face and bald head. But the car kept moving, soon it was the faintest rumble, and then they couldn't hear it at all. Still, no one moved. Leo watched Rick's hair turn blue and red with the flashing neon light from the Beverly Motor Inn sign which was just across 118th avenue. He became aware of the smell of rhubarb and realized that a stalk was pressing against his head. The ground was cold.

Slowly they all began to move, adjusting their positions, trying to peek down the alley. "He's gone," someone said. Leo heard someone get up and then he stood up as well. There was no car in sight. "It's clear," he said. They all got up and climbed out of the small garden. "That was close," Rick said.

Soon they were all talking and almost shouting about how close they came to getting caught. "Did you see his face!" "Were we ever lucky there was a garden there." "Wow, was that fun!"

They started walking towards 118th avenue, laughing and arguing about who thought of jumping into the garden, when suddenly they heard a noise, like someone running down the alley on the fine sand and pebbles. They turned to look and holy--It was him! He had rolled up behind them with the engine and headlights off! Now he slammed on the headlights and they were standing there, staring into the light like a herd of stupid cows.

"Run!"

They took off in all directions. But this time the man was getting out of his car! He had never done that before. Leo ran to the end of the alley, paying no attention to where his friends went. He started in the direction of his home. This was no joking matter, he had to get to shelter. Ray, Greg, and Bruce were running with him and he could hear that the man was chasing them. The four of them turned into an alley and then suddenly Ray, Greg and Bruce were gone. They must have cut through a yard. Leo could hear the man panting behind him like an old bear. The horrible panting was getting closer, and with his legs pumping as hard as they could, Leo knew he wasn't going to outrun the man; he had to lose him by cutting through yards. He tried to jump a small fence, but he fell and the man was on him.

Leo began to scream. "No! No! Leave me alone!"

The man picked up Leo off the ground and laughed. He was laughing out loud, roaring. "Whoa! Whoa!" he was saying.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Leo shouted at the top of his lungs, and he began to kick and swing his arms. But the man held tight to the collar of Leo's jean jacket. Leo tried to push the man's arm away, but it was like pushing against the trunk of a tree.

"Whoa," the man said. "Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you."

But Leo swung and kicked and screamed until he had no strength left. The man was short and stocky, and in the dim alley light he looked mean. He was bald and his face looked scarred. He began to laugh again. His teeth were crooked. "There's too many of you," he said. "I could've had you all in that garden, you know. It's too easy with so many. I think you should stick to a group of about four or five at the most."

Leo stared at the dark crooked face.

"Pretty clever of me to roll up behind you that way with the engine off and the lights out, eh?" His deep laughter broke out again. "It was a good round, though. But next time keep it down to four or five, okay. Someone's gonna get hurt with so many tagging along. . . See ya next week." He turned and started down the alley, back to his car.

Leo watched the man disappear into the dark alley. He stood where the man had left him, unable to move. He could smell the reek of the garbage near the fence he had failed to clear. Beside the garbage cans was an old tricycle on its side, one wheel missing. The bare trees around him clicked their branches and twigs with the cool breeze, and the streetlights shone an artificial silver moonlight to blend with the light of the real moon. The traffic along 118th avenue roared like never before, like laughter. He watched a cat walk along the top of an impossibly narrow fence across the lane. It was their cat! Deafy.

"Deafy!" Leo whispered.

She stopped and looked at Leo for a few seconds and then continued along the high white fence as though she had no idea who he was and certainly no sense of belonging to him.

Snow and Ice

Alicia got out of her father's car and walked past the high school towards the outdoor skating rink, where Phil, her fiance, was playing hockey. It was late afternoon and she was tired. She wondered why she had told Phil that she would come by to pick him up. He'd probably make her wait. And besides, couldn't he catch a ride with one of the guys? But then Alicia had been in this end of town anyway, so she guessed it would be no big deal.

She had been visiting Nora and James, her sister and brother-in-law, who lived near the river valley. A week ago, Alicia and Nora had made plans to go cross-country skiing today--the day before Christmas--with Nora's two kids and possibly James as well. There had been no snow when the arrangements were made, but the sisters had been hopeful. The plan was to go for a long ski in the river valley and then off to Mom and Dad's for Christmas Eve. But their hope had been in vain. The snow held off, so they had to settle for a long walk instead, through the grey-brown woods, under the overcast sky. It had been a cold and uneventful walk. Jason and Yvonne, Nora's kids, got cranky; James got obnoxious; Nora got patronizing; and Alicia got bored.

Twenty yards away from the rink, she could see the top half of Phil's lanky body--a red jersey and black toque. He was gliding, turning, flying like a strange bird, and the rink was full of colourful torsos doing the same thing. She could already sense the excitement and energy on the ice. These guys loved their pickup hockey, that was certain. As she approached the rink it seemed strange to her to see nothing but brownish yellow grass and a wide barren field around the boards; usually there were huge piles of snow from clearing the ice.

She walked right up to the boards and the full view of the rink opened before her. The ice looked fast and smooth. Crisp on a crisp afternoon. She could hear the furious skates cut into the hard ice; and the sharp click click of the puck passed from stick to stick. She knew some of the guys by name because they were Phil's old high-school classmates--Tony, Derek, Alex, Roland. In fact, she knew that most of the guys on the ice hung around together. Since Phil went back to school, he rarely saw these guys. Actually, he only saw them around Christmas when they all got together to play as much hockey as they could. As much hockey as their wives and girlfriends would let them, Phil always said. But with Alicia and Phil it wasn't a matter of her "letting him." They had what they considered to be a mature understanding that they should both do whatever they wanted during Christmas break. So he always played hockey, and she usually stayed at home and read, or sometimes visited a friend. This year she had hoped to take up skiing, but it looked like she would have to find herself a good book after all.

They were obviously having fun on the ice--skating hard, yelling for passes. Alicia was almost envious. She heard Phil's voice rise above the others. "Derek! Across!" he yelled. And then, "Shit!"

Their faces were red with cold, their beards and mustaches white with frost and ice, and they snorted out huge puffs of foggy air as if they were horses. Alicia didn't want to be here; she didn't want to be the patient, suffering, waiting wife or girlfriend. But even as she thought that, she had to admit that the game looked thoroughly captivating. All the guys wore brilliantly coloured jerseys and sweaters: orange, bright green, blue with white, red, yellow, and they were weaving and bobbing and darting in and out in a fury of speed and colour against the grey ice, the white boards, the dark sky. A guy in green was racing down the far boards.

"Jim!" Phil shouted high and sharp. The puck snapped across to his stick. He quickly turned in the middle of the rink, but Tony swung his stick at Phil's, knocking Phil's stick to the ice.

"Watch it, hack!" Phil shouted.

Alicia almost burst out laughing. She knew that Phil and Tony didn't like each other. They were good friends in high school and a few years after that, but they drifted apart. Phil went back to school--computer sciences at N.A.I.T.--and Tony went travelling. Tony was the Bob Dylan/Lou Reed type--scrawny, wild hair, leather jacket. And Phil was. . .what? Ordinary. Middle of the road. It was funny to see Phil and Tony together again, as equals, playing the same game. Tony was the only one not wearing a colourful sweater and a pair of sweats. Instead, he was wearing jeans and a ratty grey sweater. He looked out of place. And Alicia noticed that he wasn't very good on skates, his ankles wobbled.

Tony's team made a rush down the ice. A guy in blue passed the puck in front of the net, but someone from Phil's team--Alex--intercepted the pass. Now Phil's team was breaking for the other goal. The puck went from Alex to Phil to the guy in yellow, Derek. Derek made a clever move, pulling the puck in close to his skates, and got around Tony. Across the blueline he fired the puck over to Phil in front of the net and click--it was a goal.

"Yeah!" Phil shouted.

"Beautiful," the guy in green said.

"Yeaaa, Phil!" Alicia called out spontaneously.

But there was no hugging and patting each other like on TV. Phil's team simply skated back to their own end.

It was beginning to snow! Alicia suddenly noticed. Big, heavy flakes, falling randomly and far apart. But it was definitely snow! Finally! She wanted to dance and run. "Snow! Snow! Snow!" she silently commanded.

Phil saw Alicia--probably heard her cheer him on--and skated to her. "Hi, hon! See that goal?" he said. "Tick, tack, toe perfect."

"It's snowing!" Alicia beamed.

Phil looked up at the late afternoon sky. "Damn," he said. "Well, we won't play much longer. Do you mind watching for a while? Some of the other girls are here too--"

"Other women?"

"Yeah, Sue and Trish and their friends. I think they're in the dressing room, warming up. Gotta go." He pushed off the boards and glided towards the middle of the rink without any effort, without even moving his legs, as if he were being drawn by a magnet.

"It's snowing!" Alicia said again, to herself. She knew Phil hated snow. To him it simply meant shovelling the rink and shovelling the sidewalks. But she loved it. A white Christmas after all. Christmas had to be white--a soft blanket of pure white snow covering the barren earth, the grey pavement. It was falling more heavily now, and the wind was picking up. She knew it was the beginning of a snow storm, and she knew what she'd be doing tomorrow--skiing. Christmas day was going to be a day for skiing, not skating.

The wives and girlfriends came out of the dressing-room shack. Four of them. They weren't friends of Alicia's; they weren't even old acquaintances; they were the wives and girlfrinds of Phil's old acquaintances. Alicia wished they would have stayed in the shack. She wondered how these womem could be so passive. In their flashy ski-jackets and tight jeans, all they did was stand around and watch their men play hockey. It made her sick. And it upset her to be there at all because here she was doing the very same thing.

The four women came towards Alicia, so she smiled at them and said hi.

"Hi, Alicia," they said.

"Congratulations," Sue said.

"For wha--oh, thanks," Alicia said, and quickly added, "I didn't think you knew we were engaged."

"Oh, of course," Trish said. "Word gets around."

Of course "~~of~~ course", thought Alicia. These are the types who ten years from now will phone each other at least twice a day--if they don't already.

They all gazed at the rink. There was a layer of snow on the ice now, and the sounds were no longer crisp and clean. Everything seemed muffled and soft under the thick snow. Alicia noticed that the game had slowed down. The greens and reds and yellows and blues were running into each other, blurring, circling for the puck, which was half-buried in the snow and looked like a tiny snowplow when it was shot across the ice.

Alicia was wearing two heavy woolen sweaters and hiking boots, but she was still getting cold. She thought of leaving, but Phil had said they would quit soon, and with this snowfall they would have to. But she was tired of feeling associated with the shivering foursome in ski-jackets. So, to get away from them and to warm up her feet, she jumped over the boards and onto the ice. Pushing off the boards, she ran a few strides and then slid through the snow. The men were playing at the other end. But now they were skating towards her. Someone shot the puck ahead and it hit Alicia's boot.

"Hey!" some of the guys yelled.

"Off the ice!" Roland shouted.

"Phil, get your woman off the ice!"

Alicia was shocked to see these guys so upset. She only meant to have a little fun and warm up her feet. "I'm not on the ice," she said. "I'm on the snow." She was at least glad to hear some of them laughing. It was Tony and Phil, both laughing.

"Knock it off, you guys," Phil chuckled. "She's allowed on the rink just as much as any of you."

Alicia knew that Phil got a kick out of her when she acted crazy. Usually she found his laughter rather patronizing.

"What d'ya mean!" Roland snapped back. "C'mon, get the hell off the ice. We're having a game."

She looked at his red, frosty face. Was it frost and ice on his mustache or frozen snot? "I'll get off if you get down on your knees and kiss the ice," she said calmly.

Tony burst out laughing again, but this time Phil didn't join him. "C'mon, Rollie!" Tony shouted. "If your lips get stuck we'll scrape 'em off with a skate."

Alicia laughed with Tony, and then turned and walked to the boards. The foursome gaped in silence. Alicia pulled herself up on the boards, and sat with her feet dangling above the ice.

An orange sweater shot the puck towards Phil's net--the game was on again. Alex swooped in on the puck and pushed it with a lot of snow to Phil. Phil skated towards the middle of the rink and then turned sharp towards the boards to get around Tony. But Tony swung out his stick again, this time hitting Phil in the shin. Phil went down. Alicia winced; she was sure she heard the thud of Tony's stick against Phil's leg. But Phil quickly got up. He was screaming at Tony. "C'mon, Tony! Fucking hack!" He hobbled towards Tony and punched him hard in the chest with his hockey glove.

Tony swung his stick at Phil's. "It was an accident," he said.

"Like hell!" And Phil swung his stick back at Tony's.

Then they both began swinging, sticks dangerously high in the air. All the other guys gathered around, watching. Alex said, "Forget it, Phil."

But Phil grabbed hold of Tony's stick and slammed him down to the ice. Then with his own stick he shot snow into Tony's face. Now all the guys were holding onto Phil and shouting at him to lay off.

Tony got up slowly, snow clinging to his jeans and sweater and hair. He looked at Phil for what seemed to Alicia to be about a full minute. She couldn't tell if he said anything to Phil, but Phil's face went from anger to a blank expression. Then Tony skated towards the dressing rooms. As he approached the doorway in the boards, Alicia noticed blood dropping to the snowy ice. It fell in large drops and turned to muted-red crystals in the snow. When he stepped off the ice Alicia saw that his nose was bleeding. Had Phil punched him in the nose?

The heavy snow continued to fall, and everyone on the ice was blurry. "Snow!" she commanded again. "Snow all night!" She wished the rink would fill to the top of the boards with snow. She heard some of the guys on the ice give Phil a hard time. Apparently they felt Phil had gone too far with Tony. But Alicia didn't feel sorry for Phil. She didn't feel sorry for Tony either. Right now she didn't care at all about this little hockey drama, and she wished again that she had never come to pick up Phil. She thought of leaving, of turning around and walking away, but she only stared at the mesmerizing snow.

She began to think about the upcoming Christmas celebration at her mom and dad's in images she knew were too idyllic. She found herself longing for the warm home and rich feast: the turkey dinner, cranberry sauce, stuffing, warm bread, creamy vegetables, wine, coffee, liqueurs. The candles, red and green, glowing faces--nephews and nieces, Mom and Dad, Nora and James, Paul and Anne, Russel. And after dinner, the fireplace, the lit tree, tinsel, bells, piles of presents. The eager kids jumping, running from living room to kitchen to living room, dying to rip into their presents. The mixed nuts, mulled wine, egg-nog. Wrapping paper torn and strewn all over the room. Singing carols. Yes, especially the singing--all the old favourites into the silent night, holy night, Joy to the World. Every year this wonderful ritual singing--always the same songs for the same season. Same celebration. Nora leaning into the piano--maybe she would teach them a new song to go with the old.

The guys on the ice were dragging the nets to the shack. Phil skated to Alicia.

"See that little scrap?" he asked, smiling.

"Yeah."

"He had it coming to him, that's for sure. The little hack. Can't play hockey so he trips and hooks and slashes."

"Rough, isn't it."

"Yeah. . ." he began eagerly and then stopped, looking at her. "Why don't you come inside," he said. "It's too cold out here."

"No. I'll go start the car. Wipe off the windows."

"We can do that later," he said. "Come on. We're only taking our skates off."

Inside the dressing room there was an awkward silence. Tony was in a corner, holding a towel to his nose. Colourful jerseys were bent over, pulling at skate laces, sniffling from the cold. Phil sat down, and Alicia was surprised at his stillness. Usually by now he'd be saying something funny or stupid. Even if he was the cause of someone's anger, he was usually able to say something that cleared the air.

After a while, Derek said, "It's Christmastime! Where's your Christmas spirit, Phil and Tony?"

"Yeah," someone else said, "kiss and make up."

Everyone laughed. Phil was smiling, but Tony was looking down at his laces. He had pulled on his leather jacket. His hair was wet with melting snow. Alicia thought he looked like anything but a hockey player.

Roland already had his skates off and was walking towards the door. "Merry Christmas, guys," he said.

There was a chorus of "Merry Christmas," and "You bet," and "See ya later, Rollie." Even the foursome in the corner chimed in, as if they were part of the team, one of the guys.

The Christmas mood was overtaking the dressing room. Derek was still addressing Phil and Tony: "You can't hold a grudge at Christmastime," he said. "It's the season to be jolly."

"The season to party!" someone shouted.

"Yeah! Right on!" came the chant.

"You guys are right," Phil said firmly. "I'm not gonna lose my Christmas spirit." Then he turned to Tony and said, "Sorry for losing my cool, Tony. It was really stupid."

The guys cheered and looked to Tony for an equally magnanimous speech.

Tony looked up from cleaning the blade of his skate and said, "Sorry, I don't have a Christmas spirit. I'm not into seasons greetings and dashing through the snow. . .But I've got nothing against you, Phil."

The audience's response was only muffled and half-hearted, Alicia noticed. They obviously liked Phil's speech better. Was she the only one who noticed the pain on Tony's face?

"Who's going for draught!?" Alex shouted.

Alicia slipped out of the door and walked to the car. The soft snow came down quickly and quietly. She could feel it on her face and eyelashes. It was dark out.

As she was brushing the snow off the car, she saw Tony's dark scrawny frame walking towards her. She had only been outside for a few minutes, but she was already covered with snow.

"You look like a snowman," Tony chuckled as he walked by her. "Or should I say snow-woman?"

"Isn't this snow wonderful!" she said. "It's just what we need for Christmas." But she immediately regretted having said that.

"What does snow have to do with Christmas?" he asked.

"It makes everything seem clean and white and pure," she said.

"And virgin?" he asked.

"What are you--"

"Well, doesn't it say in the Bible that Jesus Christ's mother was a virgin? What do they call her, Virgin Mary?"

And then Alicia saw. Of course, virgin snow. Virgin snow on Christmas day for the Virgin Mary!

"But, there's nothing pure or white or virgin about this snow," Tony continued. "In a few days it will be brown and grey and dirty. And in the spring it will turn to slush and mud."

Alicia didn't know what to say.

"But I liked the way you handled Rollie out on the ice," Tony said. He was about to leave, but he looked towards the rink and said, "Here's your star on ice." He pointed at Phil who was walking across the schoolground.

Alicia almost laughed. When Phil came up to them, Tony said, "What do you think of this snow, Phil?"

"I hate it," Phil said coldly. "It's gonna be a lot of shovelling to get the ice back in shape."

Tony laughed and said, "You're not kidding. Probably more than you think." He walked away without looking at either of them.

On the way to Alicia's parents' place they were both silent for a while. Alicia watched the snow angle into the headlights. She could feel the car wanted to slide on the snowy road, so she slowed down. But it would take forever to get home this way.

"What did Tony say to you?" Phil asked.

"Oh, we just talked a little about snow."

"Did you notice that he didn't even apologize to me in the dressing room? He's the one who slashed me, and all he says is he's got nothing against me."

"Well, like he said, he doesn't have a Christmas spirit."

"What does that mean? I think he's lost a few marbles. Probably burned out the lights. Too many drugs. Ah well, I don't really care about him. . .I guess I did lose my temper, though."

Alicia watched the snow being lit up as it went past streetlights.

"You know, those guys never change," Phil said. "They're just like they were in high school. A bunch of he-men, macho-types, with their girls hanging all over them, following them everywhere they go. I'm sure glad you aren't like that."

"So am I," she said.

"Look at this snow, eh," he said in disgust. "Unbelievable. Hasn't snowed for weeks, for months, and now this!"

Alicia said to herself, "Snow! Snow all night!" Nothing could stop her from skiing tomorrow. She hoped there'd be so much snow that she'd be able to ski right over the buried rink, the buried dressing room! She thought about what Tony had said, and now she was sure he was wrong. Of course snow gets dirty and turns into slush and mud. But it also melts into water, life-giving water. In fact, in the spring everything melts into water--both snow and ice. When the sun gets hot they become the same thing. But did it have anything to do with the Christmas spirit? Depends, she thought. Depends who you're talking about. Certainly not for the dressing-room crowd.

"I could go for a sleep right now," Phil said. "At home in my warm bed."

"Why don't you?" Alicia said.

"We've got this Christmas thing at your mom's, don't we?"

"Oh, yeah." She tried to hide the sarcasm.

"Is she gonna make us sing them carols again? Joy to the Earth and whatever the hell else?" He laughed tiredly.

"Oh, probably. But you don't have to sing."

"I won't."

Alicia wondered what it would be like to break off the engagement. Break it off before Christmas even, instead of after. Before this dinner at her mom and dad's. But how would one do that? Maybe she could simply stop the car and ask him to leave. Calmly and quietly she could say, "Please get out, Phil. I don't want you in here." And then she would drive home, alone. And she would stand in the backyard and listen to the falling snow, the clear voice of the falling snow.

2

You Could Win

Mr. Laurence Hunter parked his "Sunshine Cookies and Candies" delivery van in front of his house and walked to the back door with the latest entry form for a Pepsi-Cola contest. In bold letters on the form it said, "You Could Win A Brand New Corvette." Before entering the house, he slipped the form inside his jacket.

"Hi, honey," he said to his wife, Angie, whom he could see working in the kitchen.

"Hi, dear," she said. "Did you have a good day?"

"Not really."

"Oh, what went wrong? Did the van break down again?"

"No. Nothing went wrong. It's just that nothing went right." He removed his shoes and hung up his "Sunshine Cookies and Candies" cap.

"How unfortunate," she said with a hint of sarcasm that she knew he would only catch a few minutes from now if he caught it at all.

"That's me," he said, walking towards her in the kitchen.

"No great fortune," she said, deadpan. With her hands firmly in the sink, washing carrots, she twisted her neck to face him for a kiss.

After the peck, she continued scrubbing carrots, and he went to the dining room table--where she wouldn't be able to see him--to fill out the entry form still in his jacket.

Mr. Hunter was a small man, going bald and grey at forty-five. His wife was shorter than he, and wider. She had been completely grey for quite a few years already. Sometimes when they were getting ready for bed, he would look at her body--the large hips or the breasts which seemed to be sagging--and he would say, "We're not getting any younger." Then she would look at his bald head and say, "No, we certainly aren't."

When he had completed the Pepsi-Cola form, he checked it for mistakes. He had a good understanding of how mistakes hampered winning, and so he filled things out very carefully. He had never really won much, but he believed in winning just the same. He especially liked the kind of winning where you simply left things to your own good luck. And that's why he entered a lot of contests. He had already entered the "Kellogg's Trip to Hawaii," the "Reader's Digest Sweepstakes," the "Nestle European Tour," the "Honey-Nut Cheerios VCR contest," the "Win a Lifetime of Free Gas contest," from Esso, and many others. It was the idea of winning that initially appealed to him--a great concept, he thought, to get something for nothing. But lately he thought more about the things he would win: sitting on the beach in Hawaii, under palm trees, surfers in the distance, slender brown girls throwing frisbees in front of him, begging him to join them. Or sitting in a lawn chair near his brand new motorhome, a mountain in the background, maybe a stream to the left, his wife about to enter the motorhome, one foot on the step, her hand on the rail beside the door, looking at him and smiling, her long blonde hair blowing in the slight breeze. Or else that same blonde wife coming out of the motorhome to bring him a steak dinner and a cold beer.

Mr. Hunter knew all the tricks. Carefully filling out forms was just one way of trying to win. Other methods included lining up at grand openings to win door prizes, mailing in labels, even guessing at the number of jelly beans in a jar, or guessing at the weight of a steer. He was also an astute radio listener, flicking the dial from station to station in an attempt to pick up some contest he could enter by phone.

Just the other day, he had been cruising the streets in his van when he changed the radio dial to 630 CHED and heard the D.J. say, "Caller number five will get two free tickets to the Bryan Adams 'Cuts Like a Knife World Concert Tour'." Mr. Hunter didn't know who Bryan Adams was, and he had no idea what a 'Cuts Like a Knife World Concert Tour' might be, but he whipped his van across three traffic lanes to get to the phone booth before the D.J. gave the phone number. When the number was announced, Mr. Hunter leaped from the van with a quarter already in his fingers. He burst into the phone booth, slammed in the quarter, and began dialing when suddenly he remembered that the D.J. was asking for caller number five. He would have to wait for four imbeciles to call first. Four beginners who would have no idea when to start dialing. He waited patiently in the stuffy booth. Sweat broke out on his forehead; his underarms were drenched. When he was sure four suckers had called, he dialed the number. It was busy. He retrieved his quarter and dialed again. Still busy. He quickly dialed again. Busy. Again. Busy. Panic was setting in. Some asshole was tying up the lines. He dialed twelve times before he got through to hear a young woman say, "I'm sorry, sir. You're six calls too late." It was always the same thing--a busy line or, "I'm sorry, sir. . ."

"Well I don't know why you should be sorry!" he had snapped at the young woman.

"I'm sorry, sir," she had begun again. "The contest rules do not allow--"

"Don't tell me about the contest rules! I don't want to hear about what they don't allow!" He was about to hang up on her, but she beat him to it.

Mrs. Hunter considered her husband's contest playing to be an obsession. It had been going on now for about three years, and she felt that things were only getting worse. Now he was beginning to lie and be secretive about it. She knew perfectly well that he was filling out some entry form in the dining room. Why else would he have kept one hand clutched to the bottom of his jacket? Did he think she was blind?

With the supper rattling and steaming on the stove, she sat at the kitchen table to rest. She didn't understand her husband's crazy belief in winning contests; her attitude was: if you need something go out and buy it. The only things she got for free were things she didn't want such as flyers and wine glasses at Petro-Canada that didn't match anything in the house except maybe a light fixture. She considered herself to be a person of taste, and when the subject came up between her and her husband she would talk about quality versus quantity (a wonderful expression she had learned from her best friend). But Mr. Hunter always got the two words mixed up. This was Mrs. Hunter's problem--how does one teach such fine expressions and ideas to a husband who is so terribly slow?

Suddenly she thought of calling their oldest son, Tim. Maybe he could give her some advice about Dad's obsession. Tim was just recently married, at the age of twenty, and he and his wife had moved out East because that's where electricians had to go these days if they wanted work. Mrs. Hunter believed that her son had a sensible head, and she was dying to talk to one of those kind. She went to the phone in the hallway and called him up. But when she got to talking about Dad's obsession, Tim's advice was for Dad to go out and buy lottery tickets--that way if he won he could win big. It didn't sound like good advice to Mrs. Hunter, and she secretly wondered if the East had done something negative to her boy. But Tim insisted that she let him talk to Dad.

"Listen, Dad. If you want to win something, go for the gusto--the Super Loto. Just last week a guy won ten million. Ten million, Dad! We're talking big times. Forget your Corn Flakes Sweepstakes."

"Timothy, my boy, why would I want to do that?" Mr. Hunter let the question hang for Tim to contemplate. "Why should I pay in order to win?" he continued. "What kind of winning is that where you have to pay a million bucks before you win even a quarter of it back?"

"But you have to pay for cereal and all those other products," Tim was quick to point out.

"Sure you do. But they are essentials as well. They are things we would buy whether or not there was a contest on the back. After all, a man's got to eat. Am I not right? You see, what I'm doing is really just for fun--to try out my luck. It doesn't cost me anything." He gave a nervous laugh and glanced at the corner around which he knew Angie was standing.

"I still say that if you're serious about winning you're better off to go with Super Loto or The Provincial," Tim said.

Mrs. Hunter had heard enough. She sighed heavily and went back to the kitchen to check on supper. Of course she knew that her husband's argument about not having to spend extra money was no longer true. It may have been true in the beginning, even a year ago it was probably true, but now it certainly wasn't. These days Mr. Hunter insisted that they buy a lot of Corn Flakes, Honey-Nut Cheerios, and Nestle products. And they only bought Kraft products when the "Win a Winnebago" sign was glaring inside a red star on the front of the product. In fact, Mr. Hunter would buy anything, junk food or otherwise, regardless of whether or not they needed it, as long as it had a contest. The other day he came home with a bag of dog food even though their dog had been dead for years. Mrs. Hunter was so shocked she could only stare. His explanation was that he forgot Chico was dead. He returned the dog food, but not before cutting out the tiny entry form for a year's supply of dog food--dog food was expensive and it could be sold.

Two years ago her husband would never have come home with anything from a grocery store. Two years ago he probably didn't know what the inside of a grocery store looked like. She used to do all the shopping herself until she came home one day with a box of Quaker Harvest Crunch with no contest on the back. Now they always shopped together, which, even Mrs. Hunter knew, should be a kind of victory for a woman such as her. Every woman stuck at home wants her husband to at least help out with buying groceries, or more precisely, with carrying the groceries. She listened to radio talk-shows and she admired these young women who called themselves feminists. But there was something about the way her husband finally joined her in buying groceries that seemed all wrong. She wondered if the women on the radio would call it a victory anyway--a clever manipulation of the brute. But she didn't consider herself a feminist, so she felt free to decide for herself what was victory and what was defeat. And his helping out with shopping was defeat.

After Mr. Hunter hung up the phone he walked through the kitchen and asked his wife why she had phoned Tim.

"Just wanted to talk," she said.

He went to the dining room to scan the paper for something he could win.

Mrs. Hunter set the kitchen table and then called her husband and their youngest daughter, Karen, for supper. When they were all seated, Mr. Hunter said, "Honey, you forgot my bowl."

"Did I?"

"Yes you did. You forgot to set a bowl out for me."

"And how do you know I forgot?"

"Do you see a bowl in front of me?" he asked with a short laugh.

She would have told him to get it himself, but since she was up she went to the cupboard to get him a bowl.

But then he got up as well and went to the cupboard where the cereal was kept. He peered into the Corn Flakes box and then into the Cheerios, and seeing that the Cheerios box was almost empty, he decided to finish it off.

"Dad, why do you eat cereal at suppertime, anyway?" Karen asked.

He smiled benevolently. "Well, I enjoy hot potatoes, but afterwards I always feel that I need something to cool off the mouth."

"Why not just drink milk?" she asked.

"Well, . . ." he began slowly, "I guess I find straight milk a little boring." And he winked at her.

Karen shrugged her shoulders and left it at that.

Mrs. Hunter had other ideas about why her husband had a bowl of cereal with every supper. It wasn't too difficult to figure out that the more cereal you ate, the sooner you would have to buy more, which meant entering another contest. It was all so obvious and stupid. She set the bowl down in front of him rather loudly. But he pretended not to notice.

During supper Mr. Hunter told Karen about a fat little boy who often hung around one of the 7-11 stores he delivered candies to. The boy collected hockey cards and he ususally asked Mr. Hunter for packages of gum. But today he asked Mr. Hunter if he could work for him, and then he asked if Mr. Hunter had any daughters his age.

"Gross," Karen whined.

Mr. Hunter laughed out loud, his frail little body shaking.

After supper he leafed through the Maclean's while Mrs. Hunter and Karen did the dishes. Contrary to what his wife sometimes said to him, Mr. Hunter was not completely oblivious to her feelings. He sensed her frustration and anger about his contests, but his failure to win was an oppressive weight that he could not remove. He knew as well as anyone that his luck had not been the best. In fact, he was probably the only one who knew that all he had actually ever won was a plastic BB gun from Fruit Loops. It was the fifth prize--

first was a ten-speed bicycle he had hoped to win for Karen. Ten-speeds weren't cheap.

Sitting in the living room, he recalled the one contest that still riled him. The one loss that he could not bear, even though it happened two years ago. He had all but won a weekend trip for two to the Calgary Stampede, all expenses paid. Some P.R. person from Canada Packers had phoned and told him that his was the lucky entry form chosen. All Mr. Hunter had to do was successfully answer the skill-testing question. But his brain went a little numb, and it turned out to be a nightmare. A swirl of numbers that had to be multiplied, subtracted, added, divided into the strangest contortions. And there was no calculator nearby! Tim had taken it to a friend's place to work on physics problems of all things. That loss had upset Mr. Hunter so much that he decided right then and there to quit making their annual trip south to see the Stampede. They had gone faithfully for fourteen years, but since that defeat of two years ago they haven't even seen the Calgary skyline, let alone gone into the city.

The year following this major loss Karen had cried and cried when she learned they weren't going to Calgary. And Mrs. Hunter said, "See what your contests do for us. It's a good thing your entry forms aren't chosen more often."

When the women finished the dishes, Mr. Hunter suggested that they go to the shopping mall.

Mrs. Hunter was suspicious. "What for?" she demanded.

"There's a couple of things I need to get for the van."

Karen said she needed school supplies, and Mrs. Hunter began to think about getting a new dress, so off they went.

Mr. Hunter made up his mind for good in the mall. He needed a major win. A BB gun just wasn't enough. He couldn't tell Tim on the phone, but he knew that Tim was right--it was time to take a risk. It was high time to go for it and win big. These mickey-mouse contests were hopeless. When they left the mall, Karen had a bag full of paper and binders and scribblers and pens and crayons and erasers and glue and tape; Mrs. Hunter had a new dress, a new blouse, and a new curling-iron (because it was on sale--20% off); Mr. Hunter had a lottery ticket in his back pocket.

When he was back at home, watching the evening news, he was still shaky from making the purchase. The draw was tomorrow evening.

He waited until his wife was safely in bed before he carefully removed his pants and folded them on the chair, making sure that the ticket was securely in the pocket. He crawled into bed, turned off the light, and kissed her softly. "I love you, honey," he whispered. But she was dozing off fast and only gave an inarticulate mumble for a response.

In the morning he had the eggs on by the time she stumbled, bleary-eyed, into the kitchen in her housecoat. She wasn't much of a morning person, but she always got out of bed to see him off to work.

"Morning, love. Do you want an egg?" he said.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, I put one in for you. You usually take one." He quickly fished out one of the eggs with a spoon before the water began to boil.

She put the coffee on, and they sat down together, exchanging only a few sleepy words about watering the lawn and maybe picking the beans tonight. He ate his egg and three bowls full of Corn Flakes, and then she kissed him goodbye at the porch and went back to bed.

The day went incredibly slow for Mr. Hunter on his delivery route. He could not concentrate on the cookies and candies and corner grocery stores; all he could think about was the lottery draw that would be on TV that night. It hounded him. Would he win? Would today finally be his lucky day? A lottery ticket--it still scared him. The odds weren't great, he knew. But one shouldn't think of odds--luck has nothing to do with odds, he told himself. He had always said that he wouldn't pay in order to win, but the pressure to win had been growing--especially at home.

The working day finally ended, and he raced home to have a quick supper and then watch the draw on TV. But when he stepped into the house, no one was home. It was very strange. His breakfast dishes were still on the kitchen table.

"Angie! Karen!" he called out, but there was no answer. He looked for a note on the counter, but there was none. He went out to the backyard, but it was empty. Then he heard the phone ringing and he raced back into the house.

"Hi, Laurence. This is Mike." It was Mrs. Hunter's older brother.

"Oh, hi Mike."

"Angie and Karen are over here."

"Oh good," he sighed with relief. "I was getting really worried. I thought maybe something--"

"Angie says they're going to stay here until you quit with your contests and silly games."

"She what?"

Mike repeated what he had said.

"Oh. . .well. . .why? Why is she being like this all of a sudden?"

"Laurence, open your eyes. She says nothing's the same anymore. She says you're obsessed with winning one of these contests."

"Oh." Mr. Hunter didn't know what to say. It was all so shocking. And the lottery draw was on in less than an hour.

"She's pretty upset, Laurence. I think you should come over here right away."

"Oh. . .well, I'll see what I can do," he said stupidly and hung up.

He stood by the phone, frozen. His mind jumped from, "Angie's gone" to "the draw is on in less than hour." But then he began to think: she must have found out that he had bought a lottery ticket! She must have gone snooping through his wallet! He was overcome with anger. Couldn't a man do what he felt he had to do without his wife prying and snooping? Why did she have to meddle so in his affairs? Wasn't it his money? And what right does she have to take off like that? It showed so much defiance--hatred even. Leaving the house empty all day--knowing that when he came home it would shock the hell out of him.

He turned the TV on and then turned it off. He stood there for a while, and then turned the TV on again. She could stay at her brother's for all he cared. He'd show her what she was missing by winning the draw. She'd come running back as fast as she could when she found out they had enough money to buy her a new dress every day, and enough to go to Hawaii every year, and enough to buy the biggest house in the city. This winning is all right, thought Mr. Hunter. It solved a lot of problems.

Finally the lottery draw came on. Mr. Hunter studied the bouncing little balls with numbers and wondered which were the ones that held his numbers. Five of those balls were the key to his future and it was quite maddening to watch his future bouncing around like wild popcorn. And what was wrong with this host? Why couldn't he just get on with it? Finally the host pulled out five balls and Mr. Hunter didn't win a cruddy thing.

After the draw, he sat on the couch for a long time. She couldn't have known that he bought a lottery ticket, he reasoned, because he had been the first one up in the morning and his pants were folded exactly the way he had left them at night--with the pant-leg folded up at an angle. And he would have heard her if she tried to get up in the middle of the night. Well, did she leave then just because of the contests? Just because of those stupid cereal box entries and radio offers?

He went to the kitchen and put some canned pork and beans on the stove. When it was warm, he ate it with buttered bread. For dessert he had an apple. He put the dishes on the counter, and then sat down to read the headlines of the newspaper. Then suddenly he grabbed his keys and his jacket and went out to pick up his wife and daughter.

On his way there, he tried to imagine the scene he would be faced with. He supposed the kids would be downstairs in the rumpus-room, and Angie and her brother and sister-in-law would be huddled in the living room, sipping tea maybe, and talking quietly while Angie cried softly but openly. When he got there, he would publicly give up his contests. ~~He had~~ thought about it and it seemed like the only thing to do. Besides, he had to admit, the contests really were quite useless--one plastic BB gun in three years. But he would also scold his wife for leaving. If she was crying softly, she would probably be sobbing out loud after he was through telling her off. It had to be that way, he felt. After all, didn't the experts always say that marriage had to be a two-way affair? Well, it was time he gave out something her way.

But when he stepped into their house, he heard a lot of noise and laughter. What was all this about, he wondered. He entered the kitchen and could hardly believe what he saw. They were all playing cards around the kitchen table--adults and kids. Angie had a glass of wine in her hand; the kids were drinking juice; there were peanuts and chips on the table. They all looked at Mr. Hunter, but they didn't stop their noise and laughter.

Karen said, "What took you so long, Dad?" And then she continued shouting at her cousin.

Mr. Hunter just stood there, in the middle of the kitchen, watching everyone around the table. He could not understand it. He had been all alone in his house with no supper--with nothing. And here they were having a party.

Finally Mrs. Hunter looked up at her husband and smiled, "Do you want to join us?" she said.

He looked at her for a while and then said, "Why should I? You seem to be doing fine without me." But he sat down beside her anyway. He felt her hand on his thigh.

"I knew you would," she said.

"Knew I would what?" he said sharply through the shouting kids.

But Mrs. Hunter only smiled and patted him again on the inside of his thigh.

Stop You Dead

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and Alvin was sitting in a carrel on the third floor of the Rutherford library. He wasn't studying. His head was resting on his fat arms, squashing his psychology textbook, and his eyes were getting very heavy. He could sleep. Oh, could he sleep right now.

Twenty minutes later he awoke with a start. He pushed his textbook out from under his arms and sat up, bleary eyed. He felt something wet--saliva--on his left arm and quickly wiped it on his pants. And then the pain came. His legs. He couldn't feel his legs! He was going to stand up, but his legs wouldn't let him. They were locked, stiff, numb. He tried to bend them; pain like needles shot up and down his legs. How long had he been asleep? The pain in his legs wasn't going away, if anything it was getting worse. He twisted in his chair, trying to get some blood into his legs. It was unbearable, needles jabbing everywhere. He punched his fat thighs, hit them against the bottom of the carrel. Finally the needles began to fade.

He looked around at the other students sitting in carrels and at tables. Not one of them was sleeping. They were all bent over their books, reading intently, or else working on problems with their buddies, or else taking a break for a little conversation.

But no one was sleeping. Alvin began to wonder again if he was cut out for university. He found it all so tiring. When he was working on a highway paving crew he was never this tired in the afternoons. Maybe he was too old. But he had seen a lot of students around that looked older. Still, he often felt as though he didn't quite fit. These students were big-city people. They intimidated him with their wild hair cuts and trendy clothes. They all seemed so self assured, so confident of where they were going. Sometimes he would sit in his carrel and watch the way they walked and talked. If a guy was a lazy bum he could spend a lot of time in the library or in Hub Mall simply watching people.

But Alvin was no lazy bum. He wasn't here for a good time. Working on a paving crew may not be the most challenging job, but the money was good and if all he wanted was a good time he wouldn't come to the university to find it, that's for darn sure. No, Alvin was here to work. He was here to prove that he could study, that he could better himself. The life of a construction worker in and around Tofield had become too dull for him. He recalled how he had shocked his family and friends when he announced--just half a year ago--that he was quitting his job and going to school to become a teacher. "You make more than a teacher," his younger brother had said completely baffled. Alvin tried to explain that money wasn't the point. He just wanted to get out, wanted to go to the city, to get an education before it was too late. He told everyone that his job was meaningless. He wanted a new challenge, a job where you work with people, a job that requires some thinking and understanding. He was twenty-eight and he felt that if he didn't make a move he'd be stuck on a paving crew for the rest of his life, shovelling or raking steaming-hot asphalt in thirty degrees Celsius, or sometimes operating a steel-drum roller, back and forth, up and down the asphalt mat for 10 or 12 hours.

He knew it was only a matter of time before he began to feel at home here at the university. He could learn their language; he could buy new clothes and get a hair cut. No problem. Already he was beginning to work out in the phys. ed. building because he knew that was step number one--lose some weight. All that beer-drinking with his buddies after work had taken its toll. He was too fat, especially in the gut.

He pulled his psychology textbook towards himself and began to read again, underlining most of what he read with the new yellow highliter he had just bought (everybody had one). He underlined a lot because it all seemed relevant somehow. What if you didn't underline something and then it appeared on an exam? You'd be sunk. He worked hard for a good half hour, but it wasn't sinking in--the id and the ego and the subconscious and dream analysis. He found he often had to re-read sections. His eyes were sore, so he closed them for a short while. Maybe it was the florescent light. . .or maybe he needed glasses. . .He quickly opened his eyes and shook his head lest he fall asleep again. He was reading and underlining and watching the page move, the words dance--the super-id, the alter-ego, the dreamy ego, egomaniac, egotist, dreams. . .come and go. . .Hugo Agogo, the mad scientist. . .He whipped his head back so suddenly that he almost fell out of the chair. He had begun to doze off again while underlining! This is useless, he thought, and he shut his book and jammed it into his knapsack. He would read it at home.

It was a sunny October day, and Alvin was glad to be out of that stuffy library. He walked into the parkade and got into his blue pick-up. It was a wonderful feeling to be going home after a hard day, especially a day where you had been using your head, thinking and learning and working towards a goal. When he got home he was going to sit back and listen to a record, maybe Neil Young, Comes A Time, and then later he'd watch the Oilers game. He found his Willie Nelson tape and slammed it into the tape deck. One thing he wouldn't let the university change was his taste in music--that was fixed. He turned the volume up. All right.

As he drove through the river valley he decided that school wasn't really all that bad. It was nice to go home whenever you wanted. He remembered all too well the days when it seemed to take four hours to get from four o'clock to five, or from five to six. When you're on a paving crew you're working for your paycheque, of course, but day to day all you're really looking forward to is home-time. Now, suddenly, home-time was completely Alvin's responsibility. He liked that.

Home was forty miles east of the city, where he lived on a small acreage with his mother and younger brother. He was thinking about moving to the city, but he enjoyed life in the country. The city was so hectic. And he also felt that his mother needed him around. She was a lonely woman ever since his father died of cancer (almost three years ago), and even though Alvin often disagreed with his mother, he was very concerned about her. Especially lately, he noticed that she sometimes said very strange things, things that made no sense. For example, last week when Alvin came home from school she asked him if the university taught you about the kingdom come. She said she was no longer sure if it was wise for Alvin to go to a big university in the big city, "It's just all a little too much," she said. "There is a lot of sickness breeding there, a lot of evil spirits that can get you." And then she complained that the house was too big. And then she told Alvin that her father was a religious man. Alvin had no context in which to place any of these comments; he had never heard her say anything about these subjects before--except maybe the house. But it made no sense to him. Where was his mother picking up this garbage?

He worried about her. She had always valued the finer things in life, and he could recall the little sermons she used to give to him and Jason and even father about the importance of art and culture and one's heritage. Of course, no one really listened to her. What did art and culture have to do with paving highways? But this new line she was taking was distressing. The university breeding sickness? The university as evil? Why was his mother suddenly grabbing onto these strange ideas? Not long ago she had also said to him, "Alvin be careful. I know you have a lot of your father in you--to give in, to be satisfied with a little, to set your sights on the wrong thing."

"What are you talking about?" he had said. "That's why I'm going to university, because I'm not satisfied with a little."

"Oh, I know that, dear. But I also know you. . .I truly loved your father, but I can remember so many times when he should have said 'no' but said 'yes', and when he should have said 'yes' but said 'no', and I can see that in you, too. . . .And yet, your father was such an honest, hard-working man. . ."

It was these recent talks that worried Alvin. He felt his mother was perhaps making too much of mourning father's death, and the result seemed to be her seeing things out of perspective. What in the world did she mean--he was like his father? He wasn't going to be a humble, timid man like his father, forever stuck on boring jobs like snow removal in Tofield and operating heavy equipment such as graders and backhoes. His father had hundreds of jobs that were all the same. That was not where Alvin was headed.

So he felt he had something to prove to his mother. But more importantly, he wanted to make her happy. He wanted her to be proud of her educated son. Just a few weeks ago they had sat together in the early evening on the sun-deck. They had talked about father again and Alvin's mother broke down. She wept and said it wasn't something you got over; it was something you learned to live with, like a throbbing pain in your leg that was always there, but sometimes you could ignore it. And then she began to bemoan the dreadful circumstances of her life: her two sons were grown men, she had no skills, no job. All she had was a big acreage and a big house, and what was she to do? Alvin had heard this lament often enough, and he used to scold her for making it. "Do something about your situation if you're so unhappy," he would say. "It's not too late to acquire skills and get a job. You've got to go on with your life." But on this particular evening, sitting on the sun-deck, vaguely watching the idle movement of the two horses in the field below, Alvin felt he had nothing to say to her. His sudden awareness of the deep chord of their love frightened him and kept him silent.

And that same evening they were sitting together watching the evening news. And Alvin's mother had to bring up the subject of Jason, Alvin's 22 year old brother. Alvin told ~~her~~ not to worry, but she got upset and said, "How can you say, don't worry! Do you know what kind of stories I hear about your brother? He's a reckless boy, and if he doesn't watch it he'll soon be in trouble with the law. I know about his dealings. . . .Why does he have to get messed up with drugs? Where is the strength, the convictions we once had?"

"Mother," Alvin had said, "Jason is no different than anyone else around here. I was just like him at that age, you know that.

Maybe not drugs, but I thought just like he does. Besides he's hardly into drugs--just a little pot now and then. He'll be okay; he's a good guy." It was all Alvin could think of to say.

His mother was quiet then, staring at the TV, but he knew she wasn't hearing a word about the weather or the sports.

Cruising down Highway 14, he began to think about his sociology class. It was his favourite class. His professor, Dr. MacIntosh, seemed very wise. He seemed to have such a clear understanding of why people behaved the way they did. A few classes ago, they were talking about desire. Dr. MacIntosh said everyone was full of conflicting desires, but some of the strongest desires, which everyone feels, are the desire to belong and the desire to succeed.

"A recent survey revealed that 90% of the people surveyed were unhappy with their social and economic position," he had said. "And I'm sure that isn't very shocking to any of us. But the survey also showed that 77% of the people felt that the cause of their position was simply bad luck. In other words, 77% felt that they had been dealt a bad hand, they felt they were merely victims of circumstance. And of that 77% only 13% said that they were actively trying to improve their position. So you see, even though the vast majority of people desire to be in a different social or economic class, very few are willing to make the effort to pursue that desire. Most unfortunate, but true."

Alvin always felt good after Sociology 200; it restored his confidence in the decision he had made to return to school. He felt that he already knew much of what Dr. MacIntosh talked about in class, but it was good to hear it from a university professor. If you felt that life was cruel and dog eat dog, and if you felt that you were stuck in a rut, the only thing to do about it was to be active--pursue your desires and ambitions. You had to look out for yourself--no one else was going to.

It was about five o'clock when Alvin turned off Highway 14 onto Waskahegan Road. He was good and hungry as he drove by Mike's little service station and restaurant, which was on the corner of that highway junction. The thought of food reminded him that his mother wouldn't be home for supper; she was visiting an old friend in Fort Saskatchewan. That wasn't so good--now he'd have to cook his own supper. Unless Jason was home, but Jason never cooked anything, and it was impossible to keep track of his wanderings. Alvin slowed down and thought about what he could prepare: maybe a fat slab of ham fried up juicy, some frozen veggies, and potatoes with lots of sour cream and butter--yeah, he could cook that. But now his hunger was gnawing at his stomach. Maybe he should stop at Mike's; sure, why not, he hadn't seen old Mike in a long time, not since he started school. He turned around and headed back to Mike's. The familiar sign in big red letters reminded him of good food. It said: MIKE'S GAS FOOD.

In Mike's parking lot Alvin noticed a red Kenworth rig parked parallel to the highway. Nice machine, he thought, good chrome, new tires, nice paint job. He used to see a lot of trucks like this when he was working on the highway. It always seemed a dream to him, looking up from the steaming black asphalt at some trucker sitting high and lazy in his airconditioned cab, country music blaring. He parked his pick-up and with some effort slid off the plush seat and into the cool fall air.

He lumbered into the small restaurant.

"Al Macdonald!" Mike half-shouted from behind the counter. "How ya doing! Geez, I haven't seen you in a long while."

"Hi, Mike. How's it going?"

Mike left the counter to meet Alvin. His heavy round face had a broad smile on it. "I thought you'd given up on us," Mike said, "now that you're at the university and all."

"Well, Mike, you know how it is. A man on the rise should never forget his humble beginnings." Alvin meant it as a joke and began to laugh, but Mike wasn't joining him.

"Yes, yes. You are too good for us now," Mike said. "You must be a big-city intellectual now, right? A scholar and a gentleman."

Alvin laughed again and went to his old table, the one against the far wall, across from the counter.

"Well, Scholar Al, what will you have to eat?"

"Same as always," Alvin said, "hamburger deluxe and a coffee."

Mike poured out a cup of coffee and left to place the order, and Alvin wondered why he didn't stay and chat for a while. Normally, Mike would have sat down at Alvin's table, and he would have asked about the family or some such small talk. But then everybody knew Mike was unpredictable and moody. He was a good guy, though; Alvin had known him for a long time--ever since he came to Mike's for breakfast with his dad when he was 11. He remembered that his dad told him to order first and so he ordered by reading straight off the menu, "I'll have two eggs any style", he had said. That was the first time he heard Mike's booming laugh. But now Alvin found himself feeling sorry for old Mike, stuck in this little cafe year after year.

Alvin looked around; nothing had changed of course. The same orange stools at the counter, the 7-Up clock, the Treasury Branch calendar, the cooler full of soft drinks, the wobbly tables with brown and gold chairs all brought him back to the days when he worked for Bennett Paving. They used to come to Mike's for lunch if they were working in the area. And in the winter, when paving stopped and Alvin drove a snow removal dump-truck, he had lunch here almost every day.

There was only one other person in the restaurant--a short man in a green down-filled vest and red cap, sitting at the counter.

As Alvin was pouring a stream of sugar into his coffee, he heard an excited nasal voice enter the restaurant: "When will you learn, girl? When will you see that it's useless. You'll never make it. Never! Not with me around."

He was a tall man in a long black coat. He had a grey beard and curly grey hair, and he was holding a skinny girl by the arm, practically dragging her in. The girl looked wild. Her stringy hair was in her eyes and her face was red. Behind the man and the girl came an old woman. All three of them were walking towards the counter when suddenly the girl pulled away from the man and began to run towards Mike's kitchen. But the man swung out his long leg and tripped the girl. She crashed into a table and fell to the floor. The man quickly pulled her up by the hair and set her on one of the orange stools. His face was white.

"Calm down, Ed," the old woman said in a low gruff voice.

"Well she was gonna--"

"I said calm down."

The man and the woman sat at the counter on either side of the girl, the man next to the short man in the down-filled vest.

"Give the girl a strawberry milkshake," the woman said to Mike.

"Oh. . .sure," Mike said.

"She's not my daughter," the man said to Mike.

"I never said she was," Mike said as he began to scoop out ice cream.

"That is entirely irrelevant," the man continued. "I am merely stating that this 15 year old girl is not my daughter. I want that, at least, to be clear."

"Sure boss," Mike said. "Coffee for you and the lady?"

"I'll have one, yes. Thank you. It's very kind of you to offer," the man said.

"You too ma'am?"

She nodded.

"I assume you'll want menus," Mike said. "You folks look like you've been on the road all day, and I know how hungry you can get on the road." Mike's wide smile flashed across his fat face.

Alvin chuckled softly at Mike's pushiness. He was that way with all of his customers. If he was going to wait on them, he wanted to be sure he got some money out of them. Rather boorish and backwoods, Alvin thought.

"No," the woman said, "just coffee."

"No? What about you, sir? You look starved." Mike smiled at the man.

"I thought I said no!" the woman's deep voice had an angry edge to it. Her dark eyes looked fierce.

"Yes, I think you're right. I'm quite sure you said no. But I'm asking the gentleman here. Would you like to see a menu, sir?"

The man laughed nervously, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what was happening. Finally he said, "No, I have absolutely no desire to see one."

"Absolutely," Mike said, and he slammed the switch to begin mixing the milkshake.

Alvin was looking at the skinny girl. She was leaning on the counter with her head down. Her thin red ski jacket looked too small for her and it was ripped along the right side. Alvin thought that he had never seen a more miserable young woman. Why doesn't a girl like that look after herself?

Mike brought the hamburger deluxe and sat down across from Alvin. "Bunch of numb-brain city slickers," Mike said softly.

"Just because they aren't your average trucker doesn't mean--"

"Oh, right, I forgot. I'm talking to a psychologist now. Why don't you explain to me what your average trucker is like?"

"Knock it off, Mike. What's got into you? Shit, a guy decides to go to university and suddenly you attack him like the plague."

"Yeah, well. . ." He paused for a while, and Alvin took a big bite of his hamburger. "Why don't you come around here anymore, Al? I don't mean for lunch or supper, but just to drop by and say hello. You used to be here just about every day, but this is the first time since you started school."

"I don't believe this!" Alvin said with his mouth full. "Do you keep tabs on everything I do? Geez. . .I happen to be a lot busier now that I'm in school. It's not like paving, you know--where you can go home and forget about your work. I carry a headache with me everywhere I go now. There's always something to be read or written for next class and it's impossible to keep up. Really, did you think we had picnics on the university lawns?. . . But why don't you come around and visit *us* anymore?" Mike and Alvin's father used to be good friends, going all the way back to their childhood, and after Alvin's father died, Mike would often drop by to see how they were doing. "You know my mother is a very lonely woman. She'd love to see you again. When's the last time you were at our place? I'll bet it's over a year ago."

"Yeah, I should stop in again, but we're so damn busy here. You should tell her to come down here--a free meal on me." He got up and walked back to the kitchen.

Had Mike changed somehow? Or perhaps he (Alvin) had changed since going to school. Perhaps he was more critical, or more aware, seeing things in a new and better light.

"Is that Kenworth your rig?" the tall, grey-haired man asked the short man sitting next to him.

"Yup."

"That certainly is some rig."

"Sure is."

"I wouldn't be surprised a-tall if that lovely machine could barrel through an entire forest of poplars. I'll bet it just goes and goes--stopping for nothing. What do you think, Mr. Truck Driver, could that truck plow through a forest?"

"I wouldn't wanna try 'er," the trucker said, raising his red cap slightly with his left hand and pushing back his hair with the palm of his right.

"I'll bet that truck's like Moby Dick--nothing can stop it. It will ram anything with its massive forehead. You should call it Moby Dick. . .By the way, my name is Edward Edward, forward or backward, ha, ha. And if you're wondering what these other two are to me since they aren't my family--well, the girl is just the girl, and that dark mysterious lady is the King."

Alvin listened closely to the man's bizarre speech. It wasn't often that you got this kind of entertainment at Mike's. Certainly crazy people were a common enough occurrence at Mike's, (Mike says everyone's crazy) but never someone who spoke so strangely, half-educated and half-absurd.

"Doesn't travelling beat everything," the man said to the trucker.

The trucker smiled and nodded. "It's all right," he said.

"Always going somewhere. Always on the go. Travelling--that's important. That's what we're all about--we're travellers and we travel a lot. It is absolutely essential that a person keep travelling. Travelling towards a destination, a goal. Travelling with a truck driver's grit and determination towards that distant goal, that place that can seem so elusive, can seem a mirage, but it's always there, waiting for you. Isn't that right, girl?" And he turned to look at the girl. But she was sucking on her milkshake and didn't seem to hear him. "Girl!" the man repeated. "Isn't that right?"

She looked up slowly. "Isn't what right?" she said in a flat, cold tone.

"Travelling, damn it! Isn't travelling the key to our success? Isn't travelling towards a destination what we're all about?" But the girl was stirring her straw and staring into the milkshake glass, so the man continued, "It's like The Pilgrim's Progress--you travel along the King's by-ways and highways and force them to come in. . .No, no, you travel and you encounter giants and lions and fiery pits and you meet characters like Envy and Lord Desire of Vain-glory and Mr. High- mind and Mr. Hate-light, but you press on to that Great Fair, that Sensual City. . .And there's something about vanity as well." He paused for a moment and then lowered his voice and said, "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher. All is insanity and calamity for humanity. . .unless you travel." Then he looked directly at the trucker and said, "Sir, allow me to be so bold as to say that you have a noble profession."

The trucker got up to leave. He was cleaning his teeth with a toothpick and was slowly shaking his head. "Have a good one," he said to the man and then walked to the till where Mike was standing.

"Oh, I intend to," the man said. "I always intend to."

Alvin was now convinced about the man's mental state--he was disturbed, crazy; probably escaped from the Alberta Hospital. And yet, what he said about travelling and calamity somehow reminded Alvin of his observations on his sociology class--if you don't move or travel or change, if you don't get off your butt and pursue your ambitions, then all is insanity, then life is cruel. It suddenly struck him odd that he should connect his university course with an Alberta Hospital escapee.

He watched the old woman take very slow, small sips of coffee. Her eyes were closed and Alvin could see heavy make-up around them. Her hair was dark and pulled back in a bun. Alvin wondered if she even knew what was going on around her. The scrawny girl was still leaning on the counter, slurping the last drops of her milkshake.

"What about you, son?"

Alvin looked up and saw that the man was looking directly at him.

"Yeah, you," the man chuckled, and he pointed a long finger at Alvin. "You're the only one left in the restaurant so it must be you I'm talking to, right. Well, my question is: Do you travel? Maybe you're a travelling salesman. They usually look something like you."

Alvin considered ignoring the man, but thought the best way to get rid of him was to give a short answer. He said, "Yes, I do travel, but I'm not a salesman."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the man. "And where, may I ask, are you travelling to?"

"I'm not travelling to anyplace," Alvin said. "I simply travel to the city every day."

"Oh, I see. That's not so good. It doesn't get you anywhere, my son. All you are doing then is travelling in circles, and that's bad. You see, I'm talking linear. That's my message--linear. A straight line. Take us, for example, we started at the Atlantic in the spring and we will end at the Pacific in the winter."

Alvin occupied himself with eating his fries. There was no sense in talking to an idiot.

"So," the man said after a while. "End of conversation, I see." And then in a false high voice he said, "Don't bother me, mister. I've got to eat my greasy fries because they're so very nutritious and good for my physique." And he held his hands out in front of his stomach as if he was holding onto a large belly.

Alvin glared at the man. The man smiled. Less than a year ago Alvin might have dragged this man outside and rubbed his face in the gravel for saying something like that about his weight problem. He felt like doing that now. But he was beyond that kind of fighting. It was immature, and even now he felt embarrassed for having been such a redneck with his buddies. This crazy man could ramble on all he wanted, he wasn't going to upset Alvin.

"I have a suggestion for you, son," the man said. "Rather than travel to the city by car every day, why don't you walk, or better yet, jog every day. Then every day you'd be travelling just a bit lighter."

Alvin stood up in a rush, knocking over his chair. He felt his face get hot and he was ready to charge the man, but he stopped short when the girl suddenly spun around on her stool, jumped off, and walked towards him. The man immediately grabbed for the girl, but the old woman said, "Leave her."

The girl set Alvin's chair back on its legs and sat in another chair near his.

Alvin, confused and still glaring at the man, slowly sat down.

The girl leaned towards him. "Please help me to get away," she whispered.

"Whatever she's saying, don't listen to her," the man said loudly. "We call her 'Stop-sign'. Her face stops you dead every time you look at it, ha, ha."

Alvin noticed that her face was very red, but there was something about her face and eyes that he had not noticed from a greater distance. Her skin looked dry and flaky, but her face and eyes were round and full of expression.

She poured out a stream of jumbled words, "Please get me away from them, please don't, don't let them take me because she won't and they won't let me go and he beats me, always beating me and yapping at me and--please, can't you help me, can't you? I have to get away from them, please. . .won't you, you help me, can't you take me to the police or something?"

Her face was even redder than before, and she looked scared. This has got to be some kind of bad joke, Alvin thought. She's as nutty as he is. Finally, he said, "Why don't you and your friends just leave, okay? We never asked you to come here."

"GIRL!"

The girl jumped out of her chair. It was the old woman's voice, hollow and numbing as if someone had opened the door to let the cold wind in. The girl's eyes were full of fear. The woman was looking into her coffee mug, which she held in both hands, her elbows resting on the counter. "Girl," she said again, "get in the car. Ed, take her to the car."

The man walked to Alvin's table. "Excuse me, son," he said, and he clutched the girl's wrist, "but she's got to go now. Sorry." Then he looked at the girl and said, "When will you give it up?" He pulled her towards the entrance, kicked the door open, and gave a sharp jerk on her arm to get her outside.

The old woman put some money on the counter. "So long, boys," she sang in a horrible voice. "It's been nice knowing that I knew you from the start. Sometimes I have to work and worry a bit, but this was real nice." She winked at Alvin as she walked out, her eye heavy with blue eye shadow.

Alvin and Mike looked at each other, and then Mike came walking towards Alvin's table.

"What did that girl want?" Mike asked.

"I don't know, she was blathering about getting away from them. She said the man and woman were holding her captive, and she wanted me to take her to the police."

"What? And you didn't do anything?"

"What did you want me to do? She was just as cracked as they were. It was probably some stupid joke."

"I don't believe it!" Mike was getting more angry than Alvin had ever seen him. "I suspected something from the start, but I had no way of knowing for sure. . ." He looked directly at Alvin, "Why didn't you do something, Al? You could of--"

"Why didn't you, if you suspected something?"

"She came up to you, damn it. A girl comes up to you for help and you send her away? I can't believe it--you and your university crap. What good is school if it teaches you that?"

"Lay off, Mike! Three nut-cases come in here and now you're going ape. I'll never see her again. They were all crazy. If you want to do something so badly why don't you go chase after them? You're too scared, that's why. You're all big talk now that there's nothing to do. That's your life, Mike. Locked up in this hole because you're too afraid to do anything, too afraid to take a chance."

"You're the one who had the chance to help," Mike said calmly.

"I'm not talking about that! Geez, you're slow. I'm talking about you and this stinking restaurant, I'm talking about you visiting my mother, I'm talking about the hundred and one chances. . . Forget it. Just forget it, Mike." Alvin stormed out of the restaurant, his entire body tense with anger. He wanted to hit something or someone, to swing at something with all his anger. One of Mike's cats was sitting near the door and Alvin tried to kick the living shit out of the cat, but the cat leapt away easily.

Alvin got into his truck, started it up, and revved the engine to a high, thunderous scream. His 400 four barrel, yeah. Fuck Mike. He put the pick-up in reverse and spun the tires hard on the gravel. Then he slammed it into gear and spun out of the parking lot, the engine roaring. After going a mile north, he was on the gravel road heading west to their acreage. He was going fast now--60, 65, 70 miles per hour. He gazed at the red-ball sun directly in front of him; it looked as if it was sinking into the road up ahead, sliding out of sight between the yellow fields of wheat on either side.

He hit the brakes in complete shock when he realized that he had raced right past the turn-off to their acreage. He had gone about three miles too far. He stopped in a cloud of dust and stared at the sinking red sun. Then he bowed his head, his hands still on the steering wheel, the pick-up idling quietly in the middle of the gravel road. He closed his eyes, but he could still see the red-ball image and it reminded him of the girl's red face. He tried desperately to recall the details of that face, but it all remained hazy--no clearer than the image of the sun burnt into the black of his closed eyes.

A Dying Caribou

When they arrive at Calling Lake on Friday evening they are giddy. Away for the weekend! He calls it a glorious autumn evening, and he asks her if she doesn't think it's wonderful that they can relax and do whatever they want--do nothing!--for an entire weekend.

"Most wonderful," she says.

He slips into his mock-Wordsworthian mode, trying not to laugh, "Oh, the spirit moving through this crimson lake, this forest glade and gurgling brook; listen to the still sad music--"

She tells him not to get a hard-on about it all.

He grabs her by the waist and says, "Why not?"

"Save it," she says.

"Did we only bring one condom?"

They laugh.

They want to be alone, so they walk about a hundred metres into the bush and find a small clearing to camp in. Not that there are many other people in the isolated campground--just two big motorhomes, actually--up for fishing, or maybe hunting. It's hunting season. But they don't want snot-faced brats coming up to them, sucking on chocolate bars or playing with marshmallows. Or even worse, kids asking to roast marshmallows on their fire because the kids' parents are inside playing cards and there's no fire at their camp. That happened once.

But while they're hauling their stuff to their secluded camp, a kid comes up to them anyway. It's inevitable! Only this kid isn't snot-faced. He has curly brown hair and he's wearing a brown woolen sweater, and he just stares at the two of them with round eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asks the little boy.

"Nothing," the boy says and he follows them down the narrow path.

"Where are you going?" he asks the little boy.

"Nowhere."

"Then scram. Beat it!"

"Why should I?"

He smiles, but has no reply. The kid's not as dumb as you might expect. They drop the luggage at the small clearing they have chosen for a camp.

"Are you camping out here 'cause it's darker and scarier?" the boy asks excitedly.

"No," he says. "We're camping here 'cause we don't want little boys snooping around our camp."

"Oh," says the boy, and he turns around and walks back down the darkening path.

They're glad to see him go. They don't go camping very often, but when they do it's strictly for a chance to get away from it all. A chance to be alone. Usually they go to the mountains, but this time they thought it might be fun to try some fishing at a northern lake on what promises to be an Indian summer weekend. When he was younger he used to go fishing on lakes like this with his father. But that was always in a fishing boat; now they only have a canoe.

On the long drive up to Calling Lake they had discussed what they would and wouldn't do this weekend. "And let's not talk about school," he had said.

"Or our families," she said.

"Or the church."

"Or the government."

"Or the recession."

"Or social diseases."

"Or nuclear weapons."

"Or the third world."

"Or South Africa."

"Or Nicaragua."

"Or Ronald Reagan."

"Or the Academy Awards."

And then they had burst out laughing, unable to keep it up.

"What *will* we talk about?" she had exclaimed sarcastically.

"About us or nothing," he said.

They set up the small canvas tent, and then she tries to get a fire going.

"Look at the sun drowning in the lake!" he says. "Tomorrow we'll fish it out with the jack and pickerel."

She looks at him and groans. "If you don't help me with this fire you'll be drowning in the lake."

They have been married for a little over a year now, and they're both in their fourth year of university. His major is history and hers is English. Just last night they were talking about one of their favourite topics--what will they do when they're finished school? They realize they're approaching that stage where the pressures to join the Faculty of Education are becoming stronger and stronger. After all, they have to make money. Just ask their parents about that one. Actually, you could ask them just as well. They could tell you a lot about what it's like to live in a one-bedroom basement suite. . . with a 70 year old landlord living above you.

So their discussion last night, as usual, focused on their entrapment. They really have no choice but to go into teaching. If the Faculty of Education doesn't swallow them up, they will simply spend more weary years at grad-school until they end up teaching anyway. It's a cruel system. A bitter irony. They often joke about it: "Why didn't anyone tell us that a liberal arts education would close so many doors, so quickly? You get into it thinking, 'what the heck. . .what else is there to do. . .it's just a general education, and I can always branch off.' And the next thing you know you're staring down the throat of the mighty Faculty of Ed. You're rolling down a one-way track, tumbling along a conveyor belt towards a pile of. . ." There are an infinite number of images one can use to describe this game, this process.

However, if they could be assured of a job they would both jump into the Fecalty of Ed. (as he sometimes calls it) head first. They would gladly become teachers. And they would be good teachers, too. Damn good. Teaching isn't so bad. . .probably. Now, in their fourth year of university, their big fear is that they might never be able to teach! But, of course, this doesn't alter their attitude towards the system.

These are some of the things they decided they wouldn't talk about at Calling Lake. It was okay to talk about them last night, while taking a break from studying and while listening to Paul Simon sing,

> Well, I have no opinion about this
> And I have no opinion about that,

but out here they will definitely have to put all that behind them.

They open the lawn chairs and put them side by side in front of the dancing fire. Through the narrow trees they can see the glass lake, the impressionistic sky. They talk about the subtle beauty of Northern Canadian landscapes; they make coffee on the campstove; they watch the warm fall day slip into night. But when the sun's gone, chill sets in fast and they scoot into the tent early, eager to make love, which they do without fail the first night of every camping trip. A kind of ritual. The best thing about sex outdoors is the solid ground--no squeaking bed mimicking the rhythm, no zealous landlord knocking on the ceiling with his cane. This is their little canvas space on the broad forest floor--they agree it must be the way it's meant to be done. The cold air in your nose, tingling until your skin begins to glow defiantly. And he likes the slippery nylon of the dacron sleeping bags--synthetics have their place, no doubt.

Saturday is grey and windy. The forecast had been for clear skies right through, but now it almost feels like snow. They try to make the best of it. But with the bare trees shivering, it isn't easy. The first thing they do is walk to the lake. It is a black and white photograph. No movement except the choppy water. White foam on the rocky-sand shore, a grey log, and then they do, at least, see a sandpiper scurrying across packed wet sand, oblivious to the weather.

They work hard at breakfast, but the eggs go cold anyway. The coffee is good, though. Hot. They drink cups of it and then fill the thermos.

"Should we canoe along the shore?" he says. "Maybe try a little fishing?"

"Sure."

On the big lake they fight to get at least a few metres away from the shore, away from the hollow echo of canoe against rock. The wind is an axe. Looking across, they see grey, a black line of trees, and grey forever, a menacing Kurelek sky. This is some fun, he thinks. From grey city to grey lake. The wind pushes the canoe into bending reeds.

Maybe one kilometre along the shore she says, "Let's get out of this wind for a while."

Under spruce they hear more wind, but feel less. Her long hair is frayed rope; his short hair is a new punk cut. They're quiet for a long time, sitting on the cold, dry ground. Finally, he says, "I can't stand this! You want to have a quiet relaxing weekend and look what you get. A cold wind that makes you feel like shit."

She says, "I know." After a while she says, "Don't you sometimes want to just get away from all of this? Somewhere completely different. Away from family, a new school."

"I've had it with school," he says. "I really don't know if I'll go back after this year. Sure we joke about it--going into education and all. But I don't know. Maybe we should just grab what we can get. . . .Isn't this ridiculous? Hiding in the bush in northern Alberta." He laughs, short and hollow. "Aren't you sick and tired of our crumby basement suite?"

But they are interrupted by a sound. Leaves crackling. And then voices. Loud voices, shouting, laughing. They see three men in plaid sweaters, orange caps, rifles pointing down.

"Goddammit, Eddie! You couldn't hit the broad side of a broad."

The men enter the spruce forest. "Ohhh, lookee here!" one of them says. "What have we here?" The hunters stare at them. "Two little love birds."

They look gruff, he notices, as if they've been in the wind for days. Whiskers. . .and whiskey, probably.

One of them mutters, "Lev's leat. . .less leave the love lirds."

The other two laugh hysterically.

They stand up to face the three men.

The tall one, who seems most sober, says, "You folks see any game in these parts?" And again they all laugh. "Game! you know--deer, elk, moose, caribou!" He turns to one of his buddies and says, "I think they thought I meant Monopoly or Clue or Life." Peals of hoarse laughter turning to hacking coughs, choking. "See, we want to get us some game. Big game. Big fun."

"Cat got your tongues?" one of the shorter men says.

"We haven't seen any game," he says then, trying to keep his eyes steady on the tall man.

"No, I don't suppose you would of. We pretty much cleaned out this area. Well, you have yourselves a swell time." They leave snickering. There is a beer bottle in the tall one's back pocket.

"Let's go," she says.

At the campground beach they roll on shore with white foam. There is a terrible steady knocking of aluminum fishing boat against the pier. The smell of weeds and an old man cleaning fish on a small wooden table. A few gulls circling, fighting wildly against the wind only to let go and glide gracefully. A black dog charging towards them, barking, followed by four fat people, who come right up to the canoe, panting and shouting: "Have you...did you...just a kid...see, this high...10 years, our son...just a kid...all morning...brown curly hair, in a brown sweater. . ."

They both stare from the canoe, and when the voices stop, he says, "No. No kid. Just some hunters."

One of the men--very big and round, wearing nothing but blue sweats and a white t-shirt--asks if they'll help to look for his boy.

"Of course," she says.

They pull the canoe on shore and start searching down the narrow path. They're sure the nosey kid wandered back to their camp. But he isn't there. Not even a sign of him. They move further and further along the shore, in the direction they had just come from with the canoe. There is an old overgrown road.

"Maybe he went down here," she says. They quickly start down the road, winding ~~through~~ poplar. After a while they see a beer bottle in the middle of the road. The label is not faded, and there are beads of moisture on it. "Would he be this far out?" she asks.

"Could easily be."

And then just off the road is a rustle of dry leaves. Antlers blending with branches! No, it's an arm holding the antlers! Curly brown hair.

"Hey!" he shouts at the boy.

But the boy doesn't even look. He runs, antlers held high, and they chase through brush, slashing and grey-brown whipping them in the face. Down a hill the kid runs like wind, bounding across a clearing and into sparse poplar; the kid's getting away, maybe fifty metres ahead of them. Then a roar that seems to rip the very earth. Splintering wood. Echoing boom echoing. The kid is down.

But he stops chasing. He can't move. She's coming up behind him. But he's paralyzed. That rifle shot, that bullet ripping into that little boy. He can't move. A gaping hole, blood soaking the brown sweater, soaking the yellow grass, the yellow leaves.

She comes up behind him. "Come on!" she shouts, and runs past him towards the little boy, who is down and out of sight. She finds the boy lying in the long grass, smiling with eyes bright and eerie.

The boy puts a finger to his mouth, "Shhhh."

He comes running up beside her. There is no blood. No gaping wound.

"I'm shot," the boy says.

"Where!" they shout.

"I'm dying," the boy says.

They kneel down. There is no blood. "Where are you shot!" he screams.

"In the heart," the boy says. "I'm a dying caribou, shot in the heart." The boy rolls on his back and all that's on his sweater is dead leaves and yellow grass.

She stands up, looking around. Where did the shot come from? The distant hills? Where did the bullet go? Those hunters, she thinks. It had to be those half-drunk hunters. She turns back to the boy still on the ground.

"Get up!" he shouts. "What are you doing running around in the bush with a pair of antlers!? Are you crazy!?"

"No," the boy says, his big eyes shifting into confusion and fear. He slowly gets up, wiping at the dead leaves and grass.

"Well, you almost got killed!" He's hysterical with rage. "Come on!" And he pulls the boy by the arm.

They walk towards the campground. The boy explains that he wanted to be a caribou, that's all. That he was a caribou.

"Did you realize you could have been shot out there?" he asks. "Do you know it's hunting season?"

"Of course," the boy says. "I was a caribou."

Meanwhile, she's walking along in a kind of daze, still trying to get past the why-question. Why would a kid do something like that? Running with the antlers, sure. But pretending to be a dying caribou?

"Guess where caribou come from," the boy says.

"Hush," he says.

"Up north," she says eagerly, looking at the boy.

"Yeah, but you don't know where," the boy says, looking at her challengingly. "They come from the tundra, and they migraine to the forests in the fall, and they fight with their antlers 'cause so many people want to shoot them."

"Migraine?" she laughs.

"Yeah, they migraine down the same trails every year and nothing stops them. If there's a river or a lake, they swim across and sometimes drown, but they always go--"

"It's migrate," he says. "And the bulls only fight with their antlers during breeding season."

But the boy isn't listening to him, she notices. Instead, the boy is staring at the grey lake behind the thin lines of poplar trunks.

"Do you want to see my lake castle?" the boy suddenly asks.

"A sand castle?" she says.

"No, a real castle!"

"Forget it," he says, "we're almost there."

The gravel campground opens before them with a cold blue RCMP car in the center and big men with yellow stripes looking official.

"Let's not tell them about the rifle shot," she whispers to him.

"Why not?"

"Because--" she stops when she sees that one of the RCMP officers is looking at them.

They hand the boy over to the police--the parents are still in the bush, searching--but they say nothing about the rifle shot. They only tell the RCMP about three rough-looking hunters who appear to have been drinking.

"That would be Kim and his buddies," one of the officers nods, without a trace of concern on his face.

It's early evening when they get back to their private camp. The wind hasn't given up yet, but they manage to get a small fire going for some warmth. For supper they heat up left over spaghetti from home. And they talk about the boy the whole time.

"An ignorant kid," he says.

"What was there about him, though?" she asks. "His eyes. His laughing eyes? Such freedom and imagination and danger, and yet no fear."

"But he could have been killed! That bullet must have been close!"

"The way he said, 'I'm a dying caribou.'" They both laugh, recalling that. But it's not a full laugh; it's nervous and awkward. It doesn't linger. The wind rips it away.

After supper they walk to the dark lake's edge. Endless waves, and her runners get wet. The grey is turning darker. Had it been grey all day, then? She can't remember now. She thinks that perhaps the sun was peeking through this afternoon. But then, no, no, it must have been uniformly grey.

Standing at the lakeshore, they are right up against the wind's steel edge.

"Doesn't it seem like there's nothing but endless bush?" he says. "Just more bush and more lakes. Dense bush and hundreds of lakes that you can't get across. No cities. No roads to take us out of here."

"No," she says, "It doesn't seem like that to me."

He picks up a small rock and throws it as far as he can into the lake.

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe we should go home first thing tomorrow morning. It's no good here, with this weather. I still have to fill out that application form for U of T, and I should probably work on that Castiglione paper, and I want--"

She says, "Shhh, Derek. Don't. Don't. . .let's go for a swim."

He stares at her.

"C'mon," she laughs, "let's go swimming."

"What, are you crazy? It'll be freezing."

"We won't feel it," she says. "Come on!" She pulls her sweater over her head, takes off all her clothes, and runs into the water like a child on a summer beach.

He watches the grey water splash around her thighs. She leans into the lake and the waves swirl around her white back.

"Wait! Rebecca!" he shouts, frantically trying to pull off all his clothes at once. "Wait for me!"

Tumbling

"Well, how old are you, Meg?" Donald says. "Wait, let me guess. Twenty-eight?"

"Don!" Jenny says and gives him a light slap on the arm. "Don't be so rude."

"Thirty-two," I say.

"Thirty-two!" Donald exclaims.

"Well, you don't look it," Jenny says.

"What does thirty-two look like?" I say, but Jenny just smiles. She doesn't know what to say because I'm short and kind of chubby and my hair is red and I have freckles. "How old are you two, then?" I ask.

"I'm twenty-seven and Jen's twenty-six," Donald says.

"How nice," I mutter. But I mustn't be nasty.

Donald fills our half-empty glasses with the remaining draught and says, "Should we order another pitcher?"

"Maybe we--"

"Sure," I interrupt, before Jenny can say "maybe we shouldn't", or "maybe we should go". I'm terribly thirsty tonight. And I'm curious to learn more about this couple, Donald and Jenny, my new house-mates. We live with three other people in a big old house in the river valley. Riverdale, I think it's called. I've only been here a week, so I'm not very familiar with the city. There was a small sign on a bulletin board at the university: "Co-op Housing. Cheap Rent. Phone: 429-3646." So I phoned, and here I am--tumbling into another city with new people to live with. Universities are good for that--finding cheap places to live. When I lived in Buenos Aires I found an excellent place that way. And when I spent a summer in Paris, I was able to stay in the residence for most of the time. It's funny though, I've never actually studied at a university.

It was extremely hot today; I think it got up to 26. It was my first day at work--delivering mail. Did I sweat. When I got home Jenny made me a glass of iced tea. That was nice. And during supper she looked at me and smiled (it crossed my mind, then, that she was being motherly and sympathetic--two characteristics I abhor. But I tried to convince myself that she was just being kind. Trying to make me feel at home). Then she suggested going out for a drink to a small, cool, shady lounge. Donald looked at her as if a ghost had spoken.

"Well," she said, "it's so hot. What else is there to do?"

Donald and Byron and Sylvia (was it Sylvia? I don't even know all their names yet) laughed.

"This is rare," Donald said. "I should mark it down somewhere."

"Oh, b.s." Jenny said, smiling, but looking uncomfortable or perhaps angry as well. "What do you say, Meg?" she asked. "Would you like to come out for a drink with us?"

"I'd love to."

So, here we are, sitting in a run-down downtown bar. Downtown and downstairs. It's a smoky hole, but it's the only place where we could find a table. A jazz band is sweating on a small platform in one corner. Their light show consists of a blue and red floodlight. Every song is either blue or red. This one's blue; the next will be red. A couple tables down from us someone is playing Pac-man and taking careful sips from his drink with each pause in the game. My senses are a little wavy, a little smoky.

"If you lived all over half the world, why did you come to Edmonton?" Donald asks. On his face is a grin of confidence, as if he were saying, I know what the world thinks of a city like this. I'm not as small-minded and provincial as you might think. He has a well-groomed mustache, and his brownish hair is not too short and not too long, and his eyes are not quite blue, but they aren't green either, and his body is well-proportioned, but not muscular.

"I was born here," I say.

"You were?" Jenny says.

"Yup. Lived here for eight years."

"Well, isn't that interesting," Jenny says.

I don't see what's so interesting about it, but I don't say anything.

"What brought you back?" Donald asks. "Do your parents still live here?"

"My what! My parents?" I try to laugh. "No, of course not, why? What are you. . . How should I know what brought me back? Nothing brought me back." Why are they asking all these questions? I've got to reverse this and start asking them some questions. "So, you're both studying at the university?"

"Donald is. I'm working in child-care development."

"Right. I remember now. You told me the first day I was here. And you're in medicine, right Donald?"

"You betcha." He takes a big swallow of beer.

"What year?"

"Fifth year of university. I've got three years left in medicine."

I refuse to say "wow" or pretend that I'm impressed. He's looking for it, though. I can tell. Probably gets that line whenever he tells people about his studies, his career. His life. But why am I being so mean? I've got nothing against these people.

We drink more beer. Are we running out of things to say to each other already? They seem so young. So hopeful and eager.

I light a cigarette and watch some of the others in the bar. The jazz musicians have stopped playing and they're sitting at a table of pseudo-artist-musician-intellectual types, like themselves. Repulsive. In the corner of the bar is a group of bouncy high-schoolers. They're probably old enough to be here, but why would they want to be? High-schoolers listening to jazz? Of course, maybe they couldn't find a table or stool in any other lounge either.

It's a very dark bar. The walls are what? Wood panelling? I can't tell. At least this bar has no theme--it's not British pub, or California suburb, or Mexican, or Western. It's plain, smelly, dark, hole-in-the-ground bar.

"Excuse me, sir," I say to the waiter. "Can we get another pitcher over here? Thank you."

Donald laughs in a controlled, deep way. "Big drinker, eh?"

"Not really, Doctor Donald. It's just this nagging thirst I have. . .eh." My head is light and I'm feeling good.

Jenny bursts out laughing at what I've said. I smile, and then to my great surprise there is suddenly something between us, some connection. Eye to eye. Or is it just because I've had a lot of beer. But I like her laugh. Doctor Donald. She can see the humour, the stupidity in that. In what? In serious Donald being a serious doctor. Or can she?

"What's so funny?" Donald says, but the waiter comes with the pitcher and we have to round up the money. They don't even run you a tab here.

"Jen, how did you convince your dad to go hiking with us, anyway?" Donald asks in a new tone.

"I'm not really sure. I was getting on his case again about quitting, and I was thinking about how deadening that place is, and then it struck me that he should go hiking with us."

"Where does your father work?" I ask.

"Oh, in a packing plant," Jenny says softly.

"Capital Packers," Donald says.

"He has to get out of there," Jenny says. "That summer I worked there almost did me in. Packing hunks of meat into boxes all day. It's a terrible place."

Donald shakes his head. Tsk, tsk.

"You know, I don't think my dad's ever hiked in the mountains for more than an hour with relatives from Holland. And then probably along some asphalt path."

"Is your father an immigrant?" I ask, and I really want to know all of a sudden.

"Yeah. He came from Holland in the early fifties. . . .You know, Don, when we're out there next weekend, I'm going to talk to him. On some backwoods trail, or sitting around the fire, ~~I'm going~~ to explain to him once and for all why he has to leave that factory. When he's out of his element, out of his home and out of the city, maybe he'll be convinced."

"Do you really think that will work?" I say. "What are the mountains going to do for an immigrant factory worker? Of course I don't know your father, but my father is an immigrant and. . .well, I can't imagine a European immigrant listening to the lofty theories of his--" Suddenly there is open, vicious anger all over her face. Burning eyes. What am I saying? What have I said? "Oh, I'm sorry," I quickly say. "Really, I didn't mean to offend--"

But she looks away. All I can see is her bouncy blonde hair, cut blunt and short, and her pale neck, and the dangling silver earrings.

"Let's have some more beer," Donald says.

I feel terrible. How ignorant of me to criticize her good intentions, as if I'm an authority on handling fathers.

But now Jenny is sulking, and if there's anything I can't stand it's people sulking, feeling sorry for themselves. So when she finally does turn to face me I am relieved, and even more so when I see that she is still angry.

"What you obviously don't understand," she says, "is what it's like to see your dad come home from a factory completely wiped out. Day after day, year after year, I remember him coming up the sidewalk with his eyes on the ground, drained--" Her chin is shaking.

"Oh, Jenny, I'm sorry. I had no right to say what I did. I was, I don't know. . .thinking of my father, I guess. . ."

"Does your father work in a factory?" Donald asks.

"What? No. No, he doesn't."

"What does he do?"

"Why?" I say much too suddenly.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Donald says, "Taboo subject, right?"

"No, no. . .it's just. . .no." And then I'm talking in a strange shaky voice and looking at Jenny, "I remember when I was just a kid I was in the car with my dad." Why am I saying this? I never talk about my dad. "It must have been here, in Edmonton. We were downtown and he was getting really upset because of the traffic. He hated driving, and he swore at the cars in front of us, and I said, 'They can't help it, Dad,' and then he swore at me, and he. . .he got so mad at me." Jenny and Donald are staring at me in shock. What am I saying? "And I remember secretly praying that more cars would come and block our way. I prayed for fifty accidents--" Suddenly I crack up laughing. I'm laughing hysterically, my body shaking. I try to finish the sentence, "Fifty--" is all I can say before I'm heaving again. And then Jenny sprays out the beer in her mouth she has to laugh so hard. Beer coming up through her nose. Now we're all convulsing, shaking our table and chairs. My eyes are streaming. I try again, "I prayed for fifty accidents--" but they won't let me go on. "Fifty accidents in front of (uncontrollable laughter). . .in front of us with (more laughter). . .with cars on all sides so that my father--" And then I really roar, ". . .so that my father could get as mad as he pleased." Donald is slapping his thigh. I have no idea why we are laughing. I don't even know these people.

And then we stop, slowly. A few chuckles, wide grins. I look at Jenny and smile faintly. "I'm sorry, Jen."

She reaches out her hand and touches me on the shoulder. "It's okay," she says. And I believe her.

The jazz band has started up again, but it is not good jazz. The guy on saxophone is flat--no soul, and nothing connects. The bass is mindless and mechanical. The red floodlight is on. We finish our draught and leave.

Outside, the evening air is cool and alive, and the sun still hasn't set.

"Whoooeee," Jenny says slowly, looking at her bare feet in sandals and painted toenails. "I think I'm a little, just a little. . .Mmmm."

We laugh, and Donald puts an arm around Jenny.

"Ah, Jen, you lush, you can't even handle a few glasses of draught," he says rather loudly, trying to walk very tall to prove that he can handle his.

We walk east down Jasper Avenue. Four big motorbikes rumble at a red light. On green they're off in a roar. They look sharp in their leather suits on their identical bikes. They look sharp and ridiculous racing down the main drag of this overgrown prairie town. In any town, big or small, the best parades are the spontaneous ones on Saturday night.

Two prostitutes stand at a street corner, and under the street-light they look like pale green wax. But we're under the same street-light, and I wonder if we look just as horrid to them as they look to us.

"I like downtowns," I say. "All the dirt and grime and concrete and the lights and the weirdest people. Just the weirdest, most hopeless. . ."

Jenny smiles faintly, politely, but her eyes are saying, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Donald says it, "What the hell are you getting at?"

"In all this ugliness!" I shout, and suddenly I'm aware again of all the beer I drank--its bizarre effects. "There's life here," I say softly, trying for a little more control. "People are always crying for the past, the good old days, blah, blah, blah. What's right before our eyes is what counts. The past is shit." I look at them, challengingly. "Do you see what I mean? To look at things as they really are."

"You should be a sociologist," Donald says. "You know, urbanization or something."

"No thanks," I say. "I'm not into stas--sti, stastictics--counting things."

Jenny laughs. "That's a stupid word," she says.

"It's a good word," Donald says.

"Good as gold?" I say.

"You better believe it," he says.

"And nice as hell," I say.

We walk down a wooden stairway into the river valley. It is a wide, meandering valley, full of rugged, northern-looking trees.

Funny that I don't remember this valley as a kid when we lived here. But then, we lived in the north-end, nowhere near the river.

"Hey, Meg?" Jenny says with a catch of genuine excitement. "Why don't you come hiking in the mountains with us next weekend?"

I look at her. Her face is bright. Why is she so kind and and considerate? I'm only a house-mate. "Uh, okay, sure. I'd like that--I've never been in the Rockies before."

"You haven't?" Jenny says. "Not even when you lived here?"

"No."

"Well, where does your family live now?" Donald asks.

"Can we quit with the inquisition?" I blurt out.

They look at me in utter shock, and then I know I've said too much. What is with this place?

*

We are surrounded by thick spruce, jagged grey rock, and cloudy sky. As I step out of the car, I am so struck by the power and grandeur that I can almost understand what Jenny was saying last week-end about convincing her father out here. Almost. I could also, right now, say the very same things I said to her in the arm-pit bar. Only not so maliciously.

Jenny's father, Mr. Tolenkamp, gets out of the car with a long groan. He stretches, reaching for the sky, and then resumes his slouching position. He's a short man, with big hands and a big head. He's also a little overweight.

"Vell, vell," he says, smiling at me, "vee made it."

I consider saying, Are you sure?, but say, "Yup," instead.

"Look, Dad! We're going to hike all the way up there," Jenny says in a high excited voice, pointing to the top of the tree line.

"Vell, let's get going den," her father says. "Vee won't get dair standing here. How do you get dis pack on?"

I can't help but chuckle. Mr. Tolenkamp's attitude is: if we have to do it, let's go and get it over with. No sentimentality for him. So where does his daughter get it from?

We help each other put on our packs. Then we check the car one last time and set out on the trail. The earth feels spongy under my boots; the grass along the edge of the trail is long and wet. We enter a pine forest and the sweet smell is everywhere. Green. I smell green; I see green; I feel green.

Donald is leading the way. Fearlessly, of course. His boots are brand new and squeaky, and it looks like he bought new jeans for the occasion. He suddenly stops and says, "Now don't push yourselves. If you get tired just say so and we'll take a rest. We don't want anyone passing out with exhaustion."

We don't? Speak for yourself, Donald.

"Okay, Doc," Mr. Tolenkamp says cheerily.

Mr. Tolenkamp walks with short powerful steps, and for some reason he looks funny--maybe it's his monstrous backpack, or maybe it's because he's anything but your magazine image of a backpacker. He also talks a lot.

"Dit isn't so hard," he says, the car practically still in sight.

"You haven't seen anything yet, Mr. Tolenkamp," Donald says. "Wait till we really start climbing."

"I hope you can keep up wit me," he says.

After a while we are on a steep climb, with the peak of a huge mountain in view. Donald informs us that it's Pyramid Mountain. The going is very tough as we make our way up the path of knotted roots and jutting rock. But Mr. Tolenkamp is not lagging behind at all. He is breathing heavy, but then so are we. I'm beginning to realize that he must be very strong. He walks proudly, a slight smile on his face. It's almost as if he were a child, eager to prove his ability.

And the trail doesn't get any easier for as far as we can see. It is almost straight up. A narrow path with some spots that are muddy and quite slippery. After a few hours we finally get up on a level ridge, and there is a stream cutting through rock below us. "Doesn't this just carry you away, Dad?" Jenny says, bouncing on her toes and completely out of breath.

"No," Mr. Tolenkamp puffs.

We laugh.

"Well, look at all of this!" she says, swinging her arm across the view. "It does something to you. It moves you. Makes you never want to go back to the city again."

"Oh, it is beautifool to look at, yah. But to say I never want to go back to Edmonton? No. . . .You like it so much too, Meg?"

"Well, I like cities, but these mountains sure are something."

Mr. Tolenkamp laughs loudly and says, "Yah, dat dey are, for sure."

"But what about the feel of this place?" Jenny says.

"I feel a bit warm," Mr. Tolenkamp says matter-of-factly.

Jenny sighs loudly and shrugs her shoulders. Why can't she realize that her father sees the mountains exactly as he wants to see them. It's the same thing I was trying to explain to her and Donald last Saturday downtown--you have to see things as they really are.

"Mr. Tolenkamp, do you think there's a certain charm and life to the toughness and grimness of downtown Edmonton?" I ask, hoping to prove the point to Jenny and Donald through her father.

"Sharm? No. I tink dey should bulldoze da whole ting."

"Oh."

*

Smoke rises from the small fire we are sitting around. Jenny's face and her father's are glowing orange while puffs of smoke pass in front of them. They both look tired. Actually, Jenny looks like she's ready to pass out with fatigue. Donald is sitting to my right, massaging his sore feet and now and again cursing his new boots. In the distance the pine and spruce trees have become a black wall, and the outline of Pyramid Mountain is becoming indistinquishable from the darkening sky. We have just finished our supper of lentil stew and pita bread, and I'm grateful that no one is talking.

I like Mr. Tolenkamp. He's down to earth and terribly comical without realizing it. And he sheds light on his daughter. Since moving into the co-op house, I've spent the most time with Jenny. Not that I think she's the most interesting, but after that Saturday night in the bar, she's made a number of efforts to talk to me--nothing major, just small conversation while preparing supper or doing the dishes. But I'm continually thinking, why are you trying to be so civil? And now, after seeing her father, I think I understand. She's a complete reaction to him. Fighting against everything that's in her blood. She doesn't want her father's physicalness, his earthy practicality, his emotion. She wants to fret about ideas--theories of nature. But I can hear her fresh, startling laugh when she loses control--the time she sprayed out beer she had to laugh so hard. I can see her coughing and choking as it came up through her nose.

"So how do you feel after a full day of hiking?" Donald asks Mr. Tolenkamp, while pulling on a clean pair of socks.

"A little stiff. I tought da mountains vould be hard to climb, but never so hard. But it's beautifool country. You kids are lucky, you know. Ven I was your age I could never do someting like dis. Vee had to verk, verk, verk."

"But the thing is, you *can* do it now," Jenny is quick to say. "You get five weeks of holidays and long-weekends."

"Yah, but dair are odder tings to do. And Mom vouldn't want to climb mountains."

"No, but I mean with all that vacation time, you should get out and do more," Jenny says. "You don't have to go hiking. . . .But this is the same old argument--telling you to quit your job and find a more meaningful one."

Mr. Tolenkamp is quiet. His face expressionless. I wonder if he's even heard what Jenny said. I hope not.

Donald puts a few more dead branches on the fire.

"You've never given me a good explanation why you don't quit," Jenny says.

"Money," Mr. Tolenkamp says. "A man has to make money, and at my age I could never get anodder yob."

"But--" Jenny begins frantically.

"Yenny, Yenny," Mr. Tolenkamp says gently, "you know I came to dis country poor. In da old country vee had to verk verk and still yoost scrape by. Den came da war. Did I ever tell you about da time da Nazis come to our church? I was maybe eighteen. Someone in da balcony saw dem coming so he shouted, '_Moffen_! _Moffen_!' And some of us who were of da age dey took to verk in Germany run downstairs to a secret door dat lead to da open space under da front steps. Vee could see da shiny black boots troo da cracks of da steps, and vee hear dem shout orders in da church. . ." He pauses for a few seconds. The fire cracks. "Dey didn't find us under da step, mar dey found some odder young men hiding in da yanitor's room, and dey take dem to Germany to make weapons."

I pull my eyes away from the pulsing red coals below the orange flames. It is very dark all around us, and my back is cold.

Mr. Tolenkamp starts again, in his slow monotone voice, "Ven you lived troo war and poverty, Yenny, all you want in your new country is for your kids to have it better dan you did."

My chest is tight and I'm kind of shaky, and I don't know why. None of what Mr. Tolenkamp said sounds terribly new or profound to me--it's an immigrant's story. There are hundreds like it. But there was something in his voice, something deep and painful. . .He is very quiet now, not looking at any of us.

But Jenny is obviously not feeling what I am; she says, "Dad, I know that, but when are you going to start thinking about yourself? When are you going to make some changes for your own good?"

Without a second of premeditated thought I get up and walk down the trail in the direction we haven't hiked yet.

"Where are you going, Meg?" Donald asks.

But I don't respond. I stumble down the trail until I come to a huge fallen log. The moon is beginning to shine through a thin veil of clouds and I can see it glimmering off a creek in the valley below. I sit down, and soon Jenny comes up behind me.

"What's wrong?" she says.

"Nothing. I just didn't want to be around when you guys were arguing."

"We weren't arguing."

"Well, whatever. I couldn't listen to you try to reason your father into your way of thinking. Really, I just. . .Don't you realize what he's saying to you?"

"Meg, you've got it all wrong. I love my dad, and I'm concerned about him, and I don't know what's the right and wrong way, but I know he shouldn't be in that factory. That's one thing I know."

I have nothing to say. It's beyond me. He's not my father.

*

It's a cold morning. The air is so thin; there is no medium to protect us from the mountain elements of rock and snow and sun and green-brown branches. Everything is harsh. We start down the trail with the camp on our backs once again. We pass the log where Jenny and I were sitting last night. I wonder if she's embarrassed to have a father who works in a packing plant. It isn't proper; it isn't civil; it isn't good; it isn't nice. And it seems Jenny wants a proper, civil, good, nice father.

Mr. Tolenkamp is whistling. He made us delicious pancakes for breakfast, and I think he must have been up at least an hour before us, and now he's walking like his backpack is completely empty. In front of him, Jenny and Donald are walking side by side, holding hands.

After an hour or so, we stop for a quick energizer--one granola bar each. I love the stillness the mountains demand. They power over us--angular rock, some peaked with snow under a fierce blue sky. And the rolling trees, rising and falling black-green waves. Mr. Tolenkamp is looking straight ahead, Jenny doesn't seem to be looking anywhere, and Donald is studying the map.

When we start out again I make sure I'm in front because Donald has been in the lead for the entire hike so far and it's really beginning to irritate me. We walk along the side of a steep slope. Donald is behind me, followed by Jenny and then Mr. Tolenkamp. The trail is very narrow and about twenty feet below is a small creek.

Suddenly I hear Jenny shriek, "Dad!!"

I spin around on the narrow trail. Mr. Tolenkamp is tumbling down the slope, crashing, rolling through small brush. He stops motionless at the edge of the shallow creek.

We throw off our packs and slide down the steep slope. Mr. Tolenkamp is lying face down, under the weight of his pack, and I can see that he's trying to turn over, but can't. Quickly the three of us work on removing his pack, and slowly, carefully we help him to turn over so that he can sit on a nearby rock. His face and arms are scratched up and bloody, and there is a cut above his left eye. He seems to be gasping for air.

"My ankle," he winces. "I tink it's sprained or broken." His face, under the blood and scratches is white.

Jenny is in a complete frenzy. "It's my fault," she sobs. "I should have warned you about the narrow trail. It's all my fault. Oh, Dad, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. We should never have gone hiking. It was all my idea and I should never have talked you into it--"

"Yenny," he gasps. "It's okay, shhh. It's okay. I slipped and fell, dat's all."

Jenny smiles slightly through her tears and buries her head into her father's shoulder. He holds onto her, his big hands red with scrapes and cuts.

And then it all rushes in on me. The big red hands. . .The past rushes in like a mountain slide, an avalanche. My father. My father, who used to slap us with his big hands. My father, who walked out on us and never returned, comes crashing in while I stare at Jenny and her father. And things seem to be falling down, caving in. Where is he now? Where is he when. . .I want to run, but I'm trembling and I have to sit down. I hear Donald talking. Donald is saying what must be done. Donald is saying what we must do. His voice is very loud, but I don't understand it at all. He is saying things, giving orders, taking charge; I hear my name. But it makes no sense. Donald will not stop talking; he will talk nonsense forever.

I'm sitting alone, holding onto my knees to keep from trembling. And Jenny is holding onto her father. Jenny is holding onto her dear father. I'm sitting alone, and Jenny is holding on. Jenny is holding onto her dear, dear father.

And then I hear his voice break through Donald's chatter, "It's all right," he says. "Soon it vill all be right."

The Fifth Wheel

The street is wet from an early morning shower, and now the overcast sky is filling with light. It will be a sticky warm Vancouver day; I can feel it, but I won't be around for the proof. It's seven in the morn and I'm waiting for Bare to pick me up--Bare and Sand and Liz and Marcia. I don't--we don't--know Marcia. She's just catching a ride to Edmonchuk-up to visit her parents, I guess. I don't know. Wasn't my idea to offer her a ride.

Why, you may ask, would we leave green, budding, blooming, screwing Vancouver for Edmonton, which will be brown, dead, dull, sterile this time o'year? The answer is complex and multi-sided: we have to. Well, not have to, but. . .Our good friend Nancy is getting married there. Shotgun. One in the Easy-bake. So we are spending (wasting) an entire Spring Break to go to Northern Alberta to witness this momentous occasion, to be there, to show support. I do feel sorry for Nance. She's a great kid, great fun. . .He's okay, Conrad, the father, but they're so young. 17 and 18. I couldn't imagine myself married. Poor Nance.

Here comes Barry in his Dodge Dart rust bucket, angling around the corner too fast too wide. Two wheels, almost. I can see Bare and Sand through the images of branches dancing across the windshield; she is leaning into him, her head on his shoulder.

I walk down from our front porch. Mother behind screen door, talking talking. Yes, Mom. Yes, Mom. Yes, Mom. Yes, I've got a warm sweater; yes, I've got the present; yes, I've got my Bible (even though I don't); yes, we'll be careful on the highway; yes, goodbye.

Bare, do you have to drive like that in front of my place--in front of my Mom? With Bare there is no slowing down--it's either go or stop. I'm on the boulevard now, and when he gets beside me it's STOP. Front bumper kissing pavement, ass in the air. He's laughing through reflection of leaves. I smile. Nice show, Bare. Real good. You should be real proud, Bare.

He gets out to open the trunk. "Morning, son," he says.

"I don't see any sun."

Barry is big--not fat, just big and square with a big head of curly brown steel-wool hair. Big Bare, we sometimes call him, after learning about Big Bear this year in Social 12. He took it as a compliment until I pointed out the difference in spelling and told him that meant he was the opposite of the Cree Indian chief.

I get in the car and say, "Mornin, yall."

"Yall?" Liz says.

"You all." Liz always needs an explanation.

Marcia, sitting beside Liz, at the other backseat door, is smiling. I say hi Marcia I'm Greg DeVries everyone calls me Fry. She says hi softly, shyly. She has short black hair and a rocky mountain white silk blouse. Pointy. Why look there first? asks Fry. Where else? I respond. Perhaps I should study the dirty torn ceiling of Bare's car? Gouge out my eyes? Some of the people in our church would go for that--pluck out those sinful eyes. Some have done it already-- to themselves. Figuratively, of course, as our English teacher, Mr. VanBilt--built like a van--always says. Figuratively speaking, Marcia's figure is a knock-out. Those knockers. Full red make-up lips and purple eyeshadow and big gold circles in her ears. She's tall, strong legs in jeans (brand new?), and, I don't believe it, high heels! Alright. Let's cruise, mama. Sand and Liz are wearing faded jeans and baggy sweat-shirts.

In Hope we grab coffee to go. That is, Bare, Sand, Liz, and I grab a coffee. Marcia says she doesn't want any, and she waits in the car. As we fix our coffees with cream and sugar, we talk about Marcia, naturally.

"She's hardly said two words," Liz says.

"Just reads that book," Sand says.

"Boring, boring, boring," Bare says.

"How do you know her, Liz?" I ask.

"I don't. She boards with my aunt's neighbours. Supposedly her father had to move to Edmonton for work, but she wanted to finish high school in Vancouver."

Back in the car, there is a silent, mutual agreement among the four of us to not let Queen Marcia drag us down into careful, polite manners like she did for the hour from Vancouver to Hope. Why should we care? We don't even know her. She can read to Edmonton and back for all I care. She is damn good-looking, but so what.

It's irrelevant. Are you okay? Fry asks. Will you give me that in writing? Sorry, Fry, I've got my morals.

Bare says, "Let's have some music."

"Right on!" I almost shout, looking at the silent beauty queen. "Something's gotta get us going."

Liz reaches for the box of tapes behind Marcia's head, but Marcia doesn't move or even look up from her book. Liz and I scan the tapes.

"How about Van the Man?" I say.

"Sure," Bare says.

I hand him the tape and he slides it into the tape deck. Sand sways her head to the music.

"Let's dance Dizzy Lizzy!" I say, and I put my hands on her shoulders and try to bounce her in the seat. Soon we are both bobbing to the music. Bare begins to sing along.

Marcia, without once having raised an eye, methodically turns another page. Good lord. I lean over the front seat and turn up the music; Van Morrison growls:

> When you come down
> From your Ivory Tower
> You will see
> How it really must be

When the song's over, Marcia looks at me and says, "What's an ivory tower?"

*

Everyone is asleep but Mars and me. Mars is Marcia--we found that out during supper in Kamloops when I called her Marsh and she said everyone calls her Mars. I said, oh that's even better than Marsh. It suits her (but I didn't tell her that); she seems to be from another planet, kind of spacey and celestial.

I'm driving Bare's bucket, keeping it between the nighttime lines of yellow and white, and Mars is in the backseat staring out the side window. Try as I might, I can't ignore her, at least not nearly as well as she seems to ignore us. We've been on the road for maybe ten hours now and she still hasn't told us much about herself. But she has at least joined in a few of our strung out conversations. During supper we talked about Poor Nance, and when Mars had the basic facts she said people who fool around deserve to get caught. Bare asked her what she meant and she said sexual intercourse was for marriage--her exact words, "sexual intercourse." Liz asked Mars if she would abort in those circumstances and Mars coughed up her soup like it was the first time she heard the word, the idea. "The very idea," Mars should have said. Of course, Liz, or any of us for that matter, including Nance, would never consider abortion. Our religious background would never allow it, and even though we don't admit it very often, we've got the religion of our parents stuck to us, stuck in us. A real burden; it's some Reformed thing that was hatched in Holland--John Calvin being the chicken. But I don't need my heritage to tell you about right and wrong. I can decide for myself. Sure you can, says Fry. You and the voice of your parents and your parents' parents and their parents' parents (what is that, 14, 16 voices now?) squeaking through your own voice. Maybe you're right, Fry. But I don't like those voices much, and if I could I would tell them to keep their petty ideas to themselves and let me make up my own mind.

Anyway, when I'm not watching the yellow and white highway lines, I'm glancing at Mars through the rear-view. She's dark in the corner there, but I can still make out her throat, moonwhite, the outline of a bush which is her thick black hair, and the foothill slope of her white blouse. A line from a Los Lobos song comes to mind, "Lord, it makes me tremble."

But what's her problem? For the entire trip so far, she seems to be worrying over some perplexing problem. Something's bothering her. Plaguing her. Devouring her. But what? I would ask her, but the others are asleep, and no one has said a word for at least a hundred miles now. The mystery of Mars. Celestial and silent. The closest planet to earth, but that doesn't mean it's close. You can't get there in one night. . .by car.

What does she see out that window? The wall of dark trees rushing by? Is she thinking about the fact that the trees aren't moving at all, but rather that we're the ones rushing by, flying down this dark highway? Maybe she feels uncomfortable because the four of us are great buds (ha, ha) and she doesn't know us from Eve (or is it Adam? Adam knew Eve. . .and she bore a son or two). Maybe Mars feels like the fifth wheel on a wagon. If I felt like a fifth wheel I'd make sure it was the steering wheel. Why not take control?

There is a break in the wall of trees, and a farmhouse and barn appear in the white light of two big farmyard lights. A peaceful farm, with the surrounding black. The living room window is a rectangle of warm orange light. And then, snap! Nothing but dark trees again, the lovely farm gone, behind us. I would have liked to drive up to that farmhouse, walk right in, and say, "Hi! We'd like to have a cup of coffee, please. Oh, excuse me, sir, you don't have to turn the TV off just for us; you go right on watching your favourite show--we won't stay long. Ma'am? Can you bring me my coffee here in the living room? I want to watch the cars and trucks make a movie across your picture window."

*

When we stop in a hick called Hinton, Big Bare raises his big head from Sand's lap, staring at the Husky Restaurant like he's never seen one. Finally he says, "What the hell?" He's big, but harmless as a babe. "Why are we stopping?" he says.

"Coffee," I say.

"Bullshit," Bare says. "We gotta keep going. My brother's expecting us by midnight."

"Oh, come on, Bare," Sand says, "just a quick little cup of coffee."

Before Bare says anything more--it is, after all, his car, and we're staying at his brother's place--Liz and I jump out of the front seat. Bare defeated again. Like I said, he's big but harmless.

We're sitting around a table, tired and sore. A Husky orange waitress walks up and pours out five coffees. She's fortyish with a pile of hair that has been dyed, bleached, scorched blonde. Real pretty.

"What's the population of Hick-ton?" I ask her. Chuckles from my friends.

"It's fairly low," the waitress says, "because we're damn selective." And the roaring laughter turns on me, but I laugh too. You deserved that one, Fry says. It's okay, I can handle it. Yeah, you can make 'em laugh, but you know you're rotten to the core, Fry says. That's me, full of conceit and arrogance and malice. Totally depraved. I thank my Mom and Dad and Rev. DeHoog for the concept of depravity--it comes in handy when I screw up real bad. No guilt 'cause everyone's equally terrible--it's great!

When the laughter subsides, Bare orders banana cream pie. Which starts us laughing again, three of us anyway, Mars only smiles.

"What?" Bare says. "What's so funny about ordering a piece of pie?"

"A big man like that--" the waitress says.

The thing is, Bare always orders something, even when he's the one who says we've got no time to stop for coffee.

When we're walking out of the restaurant, I ask Mars what she plans to do after high school.

"I hope to work with my father," she says.

"What kind of business is he in?"

"He's a pastor."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"No, I mean I'm sorry for assuming he was in business. What church does he preach in?"

"It's a kind of offshoot from an Alliance church."

"Oh yeah." So she is a Christian. Different from us, though. But what could an offshoot from an Alliance church be?

No one wants to drive, so finally Mars offers to--she's the only one who hasn't driven yet.

"Fry, why don't you sit in the front," Liz says to me.

"Oh. . .okay," I say as coolly as I can.

As soon as we're out of Hicktown, Mars speeds up and passes a mile-long rig with the greatest of ease and confidence. Somehow I thought she'd be a timid driver, you know, 57 m.p.h., until she gets locked behind a truck and then it's 54 all the way into town. And not because she's a woman--you should see Sand drive! But Mars is even better than Sand.

"Do you like driving, Marcia?" Liz asks.

"I love it," Mars says and giggles. "I used to do a lot of highway driving when we lived in the country."

She seems to be much more open to talking, so I ask her what kind of work she'll be doing with her father after she finishes high school.

"Mostly evangelism," she says. "And I'll be helping out with some of the church teaching programs for kids."

"What do you mean by evangelism?" asks Bare with a trace of cynicism that is easy to detect if you know him.

"What d'ya think?" she says in a half-challenging half-mocking tone. "Door-to-door, of course. And maybe I'll work on church publications as well. Who knows. There's tons to do. I guess it depends on how much my father decides to get involved in TV Evangelism. He's done some of that in Vancouver and some with American preachers, but supposedly there's all kinds of new possibilities in Edmonton."

I do not dare ask which American TV preachers. Maybe there are some good ones. Who are you trying to kid? asks Fry.

"Sounds exciting," Liz says unconvincingly, just to be kind I'm sure.

"Of course it's exciting!" Mars says. "When you've got the call to evangelize. . .well. . .there isn't a dull second."

Good point, Mars. Let's all go to seminary. Bare and I can become ministers, and you girls, unfortunately, will have to settle for missionaries because our church doesn't let women preach. (Woe unto men, says Fry). Put your Dutch legacy to work, says Fry, your high and well-polished set of morals. Yes, of course. I consider the possibility that working for the Lord might only mean THE CALL to preach or teach or evangelize, as Mars seems to imply. Perhaps you have THE CALL, says Fry. I hope not; I'm sure I don't. Is it anything like the flu? It's worse, says Fry. And I suppose if you're a woman, a girl, the call can only be a leaning, an inclination towards the missions. I recall the silly grade school prayers that all us kids prayed, "Be with the missionaries in the mission fields." And I remember trying to picture a mission field and all I could come up with was my uncle's farm in the Fraser Valley.

None of us want to pursue this fundy thing with the planet Mars. It's too scary, too touchy-feely. Bare and Sand cuddle up for more sleep or whatever it is they do in that dark corner of the backseat. Probably not sleep. Geez, how long have you been around? asks Fry. There's all kinds of subtle and not so subtle things they could do in the backseat--even with Liz sitting next to them. Use your imagination. I apologize for being slow. It's been a long time since Gloria dumped me. Apology accepted, says Fry, after all you do have those nasty morals to contend with.

Soon the backseat is silent. Liz has passed out, and Bare and Sand--well, I'm not going to check on them too closely. They are quiet, so perhaps they got bored or sore or frustrated--probably the latter. Mars is driving very well. I hope she doesn't spring the evangelism thing on me again. I sneak a glance at her--Lord, it still makes me tremble. My eyes drop to her thighs and the V in her jeans just above her thighs, only faintly visible from the dash light. Mars, can I be your moon? Please, don't get weepy on us, says Fry. Besides, you heard her, she's an Alliance offshoot--unreformable.

"What do you think about the work I'll be doing in our church, Greg?"

Greg? She called me Greg. No one calls me Greg. How did she remember? Answer her! shouts Fry. "Ah. . . .it sounds very challenging."

"Working for the Lord is always challenging, dumby. Didn't I just say that a few minutes ago to Liz?"

She won't leave it alone, obviously. I am very tired. Twelve hours on the road makes my mind go funny. Can we drop it, Mars? Let's just go to sleep like everyone in the backseat. Did you say, "together"? Well, since you brought it up, I don't mind if we do. Hey, Dishrag-brain, keep the conversation going, says Fry. Right. "I used to go to church," I say. I still do, but I don't tell her that. Why are you lying? asks Fry. But I tell him to shut-up and keep out of it.

"Really!" she exclaims, her blouse rising, pointing to the stars. "Well, Gregory, you are the very person we're trying to reach out to at our church."

Gregory! Only my mother calls me that! And my Oma.

"We wanna help people who've given up on church, people who have somehow lost the way."

What about the truth and the light? But I can't say it. She is beautiful, but so incredibly naive. Her big eyes are brilliant; they literally light up my face, my gut. Debbie Boone comes to mind, singing "You Light Up My Life" to both her lover and Christ. That's absurd. How can you sing to both at the same time? Van Morrison sings, "She Gives Me Religion." But who can say for sure what he means?

Mars continues to pour it on: "I've met hundreds of people like you, Greg--"

"Thanks."

"No," she laughs, "I mean people who have chucked their faith. Back-sliding is so so common in our day and age."

"I never said anything about sliding backwards or losing faith," I say.

"Oh, but Gregory, Gregory, that's just it! That's what everyone says. But it's a big fat lie. You're either turned on for Jesus or turned off. And if you're really turned on you'd be ready to lay down your life--"

"Where would you lay it?"

And without warning there is real emotion in her voice, her voice breaking, "Greg, why do you have to be so *cynical*?" She looks at me and there are tears on her face, her bottom lip quivers.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to upset you, Marcia. Really."

She wipes the tears away and smiles faintly. Exquisite, that's the word that Fry whispers in my ear. Exquisite beauty and pain. Deep feeling. Strong emotion. Fry asks if I know what I'm getting into.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" she says softly. "You're plain old chicken to let go and have Jesus turn you on."

She's right, says Fry. You *are* afraid, but do you know of what or whom?

Suddenly there is a loud bang, and I jump in my seat. The car is going clunk, clunk, and it feels like we've lost a wheel. When I see the hood at an angle I finally realize that we have a flat tire. The front tire on my side. Mars pulls into the shoulder, and I see that she's about to burst out laughing.

"What?" I say shakily. "What's so funny?"

"Your face," she laughs. "You should have seen your face when the tire blew. You looked like you had been shot."

I smile faintly. I feel confused and tired; and I listen for Fry, listen for his instructions. But he isn't there.

"We've got a flat, eh?" Bare says slowly.

"Yeah, and it's on Greg's side!" Mars says like it's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to her. Why is she so bright and lively and happy? Maybe she prayed for a flat.

We all get out, and it's windy and cold. We stare at the flat, but it's too cold to think or feel sorry or get upset. We get to work. Bare finds the equipment in the trunk, jacks up the car; I remove the flat and carry it to the trunk, while Bare and Sand put on the spare. When I'm placing the flat in the trunk, Mars is beside me, and even out here in the cold tundra her voice is warm and surprisingly deep. She says, "Hey Gregory, why did the chicken cross the street?"

When I get the tire in its place I look up and hit my head on the trunk, but I hardly feel it and she doesn't laugh. I stare into her face which is beautiful and mysterious in the dim light. Her lips form a sly smile.

"To get to the other side," I say.

"No, just because he was a chicken." She laughs.

If there is something to say, I don't know what it is. I look down and notice her high heels. Her ankles must be freezing.

*

Mars stops the car in front of her parents' place--somewhere in the West-end of Edmonton. I offer to get her suitcase and bags from the trunk while she says goodbye to the others. It's so blowing cold, where's that sweater I packed, Mother? I'm so tired. Fry? Are you there? I guess Fry's had enough; he's probably sleeping.

At the back door Mars turns to face me. "Thanks," she says and smiles so, she glows so. . .She is (I imagine) so warm. Her jacket isn't even done up, a soft blouse, a warm blouse, a place to sleep.

"And thanks for talking with me," she says.

"Thanks to you. . .ah, thank you, for letting me--for talking to, talking with me." Why am I stumbling over my words like an idiot?

She giggles. "I hope that what I said doesn't seem totally crazy to you."

"Oh, not at all--"

"If you want, you could work with us in our church. It's up to you."

"Work with you?"

"Sure, why not? There's canvassing to do and writing pamphlets and all kinds of things. You'd love my father. Can he preach. He'd help you win back your faith, no problem. Really, he's always working with backsliders. But, will you take it to heart, Greg? Will you help us in our campaign? My father says TV is the most exciting medium to get into today."

"I don't know. I'm confused, I mean. . ." Her chin is strong; lips, full.

"It's okay," she smiles full, and then I think yes I can love her. "Why don't you come visit us sometime this week? You can talk to my father and I'm sure he'll bring you around."

"I'd like to. Maybe your father can staighten me out. I'll come tomorrow."

She laughs. "You better go--they're waiting."

Without saying goodbye, I turn and run back to the car. I trip on the sidewalk and fall heavily against the side of the car, stumble inside and tell them I'm okay, even though my shoulder is killing me.

They laugh, and Liz says, "Was she that scary that you had to run away?"

Then I'm so tired I'm sick.

*

I sit up on the edge of my bed and reach for my watch. Eleven in the morning, but I feel like I hardly slept. There is a

Rembrandt print on the wall and a vase of dried flowers on a small table. Guest room. I walk to the window and pull the curtains back. A grey day enters. Lawns and street are lightly covered with fresh snow. To the left I can see the Dodge Dart sitting quietly and stupidly on the suburban driveway. All day yesterday we were screaming down the highway in that thing--racing to get to this big house, this dull bedroom.

Mars. Oh yeah, talking with Mars last night, for what seems like hours and hours. Suddenly I have a terrible headache. What did she all say to me? I was so tired and mixed up I think I started to agree with her. Did I? I know I said I'd visit her. I said I'd talk to her father and get myself straightened out. Why did I say what I did? It's as if I was drunk--I can't remember my thinking, my reasons. I remember being very tired. It was a long day, a forever day.

Is my head ringing because of Mars or because of the long tiring drive? I don't feel like driving today. And I certainly don't feel like seeing Mars. In fact, I think I'd prefer to never see her again. I'm not sliding backwards; I've got my faith (the religion of my parents' parents' parents stuck in my throat). Why is my head ringing? Mars, why were you trying to smash in my head? Why did you take everything you had and use it as a club, a bat to my head? But if I did see you today, Mars, I would say thanks. Really, I would. My head needed a bashing, but surely once is enough, though I know you don't think so. You'd start swinging as soon as I got there, trying to turn me into a TV preacher. How utterly revolting, Mars. Really, you're disgusting. And I'm not that strong. If I saw you today, I'd also want to kiss you--all over. Every look, image, pose you gave me in that nighttime car. The way you drove.

Fry? Are you there, you chicken-shit sleepy-head? Why did you abandon me last night? Can you get me out of this one? Fry yawns loudly and then says: Relax. Take it easy. Don't get your shit tied in a knot. Why don't you grab your Walkman, slip outside, and go for a long walk through the fresh white snow, past all the quiet sleepy houses. Thanks, Fry. You're a real pal.

River Through the Badlands

Already I'm the only one paddling, even though it was probably only ten minutes ago that we slipped into the river like a silent beaver. I always knew Dwight was lazy, but I never knew it was this bad. Maybe he thinks the river is moving us along just fine. That would be Dwight--dumb as a stick about some things, and he thinks he's joe-hunter-outdoorsman when he talks about going hunting and fishing with his dad. He's sitting in the front 'cause he doesn't even know how to steer, though he says he does.

"Hey Cousin Glen!" he shouts--he always calls me Cousin Glen 'cause he thinks it's funny or something--"This canoeing's all right, isn't it!"

"Yeah, but you should be paddling," I say.

"I thought the guy in the back did all the paddling?"

"Right. And your paddle's for swatting mosquitoes."

He laughs and throws back his long messy blond hair with a yellow Peterbilt Trucks cap on. I laugh too because he can be such an idiot.

"It's gonna be excellent, hey Dwight? Just us two on the river for five days."

"Right on," he says and spits high into the air. I can see it make a beautiful arc against the dark green spruce trees.

"Like your dad said, there's nothing quite as good as canoeing in the badlands."

"My dad says a lot of things."

Even though Dwight and I aren't the same kind of friends anymore, I know it's gonna be great. We used to be best friends--real big buddies. My family would drive out to their farm on Saturdays or Sundays, and Dwight and I would swim in the river or ride their horse. I remember Dwight would always tease me about being a city-slicker and then I would fight him because I was almost as big as he was. But we usually ended up laughing so hard we couldn't fight, though once or twice it turned into a real fight. I can remember he gave me a bloody nose once and I gave him a black eye in return.

Now it's different, though. We're getting pretty old--this fall I start grade nine and Dwight starts high school--and I guess things never really stay the same when you get older. I don't like Dwight's friends much--they're mostly tough-looking and dumb. They all like to drink beer and talk about the pick-up trucks they'll buy, and that's all fine I guess, but it gets so boring. The only exception is Dwight's girlfriend, Michelle. I only saw her once, but she's really nice. Probably the nicest person I ever met. And good-looking too! Wow! Actually, I really don't know what she sees in Dwight. She's at least twice as smart as him, even though she's a year younger--the same age as me. I don't know why Dwight is always so lucky.

She only lives a few miles away from Dwight's place and when I was at the farm earlier this summer to talk to Dwight about canoeing, we later went to visit Michelle. Their acreage is right by the Red Deer River, so after we had pop and chips in the backyard we decided to go for a swim in the river. Right from the start there was something about the way she talked and laughed that I liked. We walked down to the river and when Dwight swore for not having thought of taking his dad's four-by-four, Michelle looked at me and we both started laughing. She wore a red bathing suit and she was very brown and very developed or "stacked" as Dwight said later when we were going home. We waded into a deep pool in the river but it was cold, so we all started splashing each other. First Dwight got Michelle soaked and pulled her into the water, and then they both went after me. Michelle was holding onto my arms and Dwight had me by the leg. I was trying to fight off Michelle, but I was laughing so hard I couldn't do it. I grabbed her by the waist when I began to fall and she came down with me. Underwater I could feel her soft body next to mine. The water was freezing, but she felt warm. We immediately jumped up and my arms were still around her waist. Her skin was smooth and slippery-wet, and it sent a flash of fire through my chest and into my stomach. I remember Dwight was laughing his head off 'cause we fell in together, but Michelle and I were too stunned to laugh. I dropped my arms from her waist and she looked at me and then we both looked away.

Anyway, like I was saying, I don't see Dwight very often anymore and that time with Michelle was the last time before this canoe trip. Still, I'm glad that he agreed to come along 'cause he's really the only one I know of to go canoeing with, and he's not into canoeing the way I am. He likes hunting and four-wheeling and riding his dirt-bike. So I guess I'm pretty lucky to have him come with me. If it wasn't for him I'd never be able to make this trip.

We started at the Content Campground, near Nevis, and already the banks are turning into badlands. On the north shore there is a brown clay cliff about four metres high, and above that is thick spruce going up a steep hill. Every once in a while a coulee runs down to the river, making an opening in the cliff below. On the south shore is long grass swaying in front of a dry, desert-like hill.

"We should've brought a ghettoblaster along, Cousin Glen," he says, and he turns his paddle into a guitar and does a guitar solo, screeching, "Weeerr, weeeerrr."

"You're rocking the canoe," I shout.

"Rockin' and rollin'," he says, and we both laugh.

I turn my paddle into a guitar as well and then we both sing the first lines of "We're Not Gonna Take It"--Dwight's favourite song. It's a moronic song with an even more moronic video, but I go along with it anyway.

Eventually we settle into some steady paddling and I'm glad. Dwight distracts me. He doesn't think twice about what he's looking at, and I don't think the river means much to him. But for me the river is full of mystery and magic--all this moving water that never runs out. It just flows and flows. I always expect a definite end to the moving water, like the caboose on a train, but luckily that will never happen. And it freaks me out when I think that this water carrying us into the badlands was once way up in the mountains as trickles of melting snow and ice. Or to think that this river has cut through the land to make this valley. It's even more incredible than thinking about how a TV works.

Suddenly Dwight's shouting, "Glen! A rock! On the left! To the right!"

"Left or right!?" I shout.

"Left! Right, right! Go to the right!"

But his instructions are so stupid that we miss the looming rock by inches before I even try to veer left or right. I want to yell at him, but I don't 'cause he hasn't done much canoeing and even I haven't canoed on a river very often, so I guess we'll learn as we go along. I just say, "Next time try to make it clear where the rock is, Dwight."

"Yeah, I better," he says, "you sure didn't handle that one very well. You want a smoke?" He pulls out his pack and leans back to offer me one.

"You know I don't smoke," I say.

"So what. I thought maybe you'd take one out here on a canoe trip. Come on, try it."

I pull a cigarette from the pack, and Dwight tosses his lighter to me. The canoe starts to drift sideways as I try to light the smoke. And then with bleary eyes and much coughing I straighten out the canoe so that we're pointing downstream again. Dwight laughs at my clumsiness, and when he turns around I drop the cigarette in the wet canoe-bottom.

We pass a sign on shore that says something about a pipeline crossing the river. A few miles later we see an old bridge with steel girders painted green, and as we approach it an old pick-up speeds across. After a few more bends we come upon a herd of cattle drinking from the river, and they stare at us like they've never seen a canoe before. You're not supposed to see stupid farm animals on a wilderness trip. But I guess if you're in the middle of Alberta you can expect to see some. Still, when Uncle Bob and my dad dropped us off this morning, Uncle Bob kept telling us we were in for a real wilderness trip. He said the valley was so incredible you hardly knew you were in Alberta, and he told us there'd be lots of deer and coyotes and hawks and great blue herons. Of course, right after that my dad had to remind us about all the pollution on the river--the old tires and barrels and rusted cars maybe. And he told us about the houses and campgrounds and bridges, and then he said it wasn't really true wilderness anymore. I knew all this, but I didn't want to hear it, and I was mad at my dad. He always tries to take the excitement out of things.

And sure enough, it doesn't take very long before we are drifting past a campground. It's depressing--we might as well be in a city park right now. A boy is fishing from shore, and his tiny dog is yapping at us. The campground is full of motorhomes and trailers and tents--you'd think it was the Saturday of the July long-weekend instead of a regular Saturday in August. Two old couples are playing lawn darts in front of their Winnebago, and a few cramped sites down a lady is reading a book, sitting at a picnic table with a red and white tablecloth. What a horrible sight. We pass the campground and drift under the bridge not far away.

Later we see Canada geese fluttering nervously on the grassy shore. I steer towards them, quietly. They make little squawking noises and slowly start walking downstream. As we get closer they walk faster. But suddenly Dwight slaps his paddle on the water and says, "Fly! Fly, you bastards!"

"Don't!" I say.

"Fly!" he says, trying to splash the birds.

When we are even with the birds they make even more noise, and start flapping their wings. But rather than fly, they turn around and walk upstream, away from us.

Around suppertime we start looking for a place to set up camp. Dwight spots a little grassy area on the left, but it doesn't look like much to me.

"Quick! Let's go for it!" he says.

"I don't know, it doesn't--"

"Glen! Start turning! We're gonna miss it!"

We get to the spot and I'm right--it's not much of a camp spot. The ground is sloped and there are no nice trees around, just willow saplings. But Dwight insists that it's good enough and says we have to hurry and set things up and get the supper on. He keeps bossing me around and I say, "Yes, sir, Captain," "Aye, aye, Captain, sir." But he doesn't get it.

After supper we decide to try a little fishing. We put on Deep Woods Off and head upstream with our fishing gear, walking through bush and saplings. The smell of rotting underbrush and dead leaves and insect repellent gets in my nose. Dwight stops when we come to a deep still pool of water.

"This is where the goldeye will be," he says.

But we don't catch a thing. We try a number of different spots, but not even a bite. When the setting sun makes the valley golden we decide to quit, and I can tell that Dwight is upset about not catching anything. But it doesn't bother me; I don't really care about fishing. It's such a quiet evening. The long green grass, the rocks, the willow saplings, even our legs and arms and faces are all glowing with the golden-yellow dusk. Insects buzz in crazy patterns above the still river. They look like specks of light. I turn and stare at the old hills downstream--they are pink and purple against the dark blue sky.

But then I hear a faint rumbling noise, growing louder. "Do you hear that?" I say.

"Yeah, sounds like a four-wheel drive."

"In this valley?" I say worriedly as the sound gets louder.

"Shh! Listen. . .It sounds like a Suzuki. . .or a Jeep, maybe," and then he plucks a long stem of grass and chews on the end of it.

We both stand silent for a while. The noise fades away. "It's gone," I say. "It was probably just crossing a bridge nearby."

"You must be going deaf!" he says. "That was someone four-wheeling, and he wasn't on no road. If he was on a road the engine would have sounded like a steady hum." He spits out a bit of grass and says, "Let's go back to the camp."

The sun has already dropped behind the trees, and now it's getting dark. We try to build a fire, but there isn't much dead wood around, and a lot of it is wet from all the rain yesterday. After a long time we get a smoky, smouldering fire going, and by the time we sit down to relax the sky is black and full of stars--at least a million more stars than you ever could see in the city. And the moon is rising like a hot-air balloon--just an hour ago it was only peeking over the hills downstream. Now it's drifting free and shining in the river. Dwight offers me a cigarette but I say no like I mean it, so he doesn't press it. He lights one for himself, and we stare at the weak flames.

It's a calm warm night, but I'm kind of upset 'cause it hasn't been much of a wilderness trip so far. All we've seen are bridges and pick-ups and cattle and signs about pipelines and campgrounds and garbage on the shores downstream from campgrounds. No wildlife, except for those Canada geese.

"How's Michelle?" I ask.

"How should I know?" he says.

"Well you're going out with her, aren't you?"

"No. That's over."

"Since when?"

"Since I found out she's a snob. She thinks she's too good for everybody, and I finally had enough of it."

"What? She wasn't like that when I met her."

"Sure she was. You were just too blind to see it."

He's obviously lying 'cause Michelle certainly wasn't snobbish when I saw her. She was the exact opposite--friendly and kind. The image of her in her red bathing suit comes back to me--standing in the river, trying to pull me down, and then underwater with my arms around her waist. I'll never forget that! And then when Dwight and I left that afternoon, she said "Bye, Glen" in a kind of sing-song way, and to me it sounded more like, "I hope I'll see you again, Glen."

"What happened?" I ask Dwight. "Did you guys have a fight or something?"

"Just forget it," he says. "I don't want to talk about it with you. You'll probably tell half the world."

"What's your problem? You don't have to take it out on me. I'll bet Michelle broke it off with you!" I say it before I really realize what I've said.

He glares at me through the blond hair hanging in front of his eyes.

"Yeah," I say, now that I've begun, "I'm sure she broke up with you, Dwight. And who could blame her." I get up and start walking away. I don't want to be around him.

I head downstream towards the black hills. There is a narrow trail running along the river and in the moonlight I can just see enough to follow it. The river makes soft gargling sounds; it relaxes me. It is alive like something quiet and powerful with its broad back moving and glistening in the dim light. This is what I'll do every time Dwight starts to irritate me--simply walk away and be alone.

He doesn't deserve someone like Michelle. Probably treated her like dirt. I wonder if he knows I'd love to go out with her. And I would, too. I'd go out with her any day, and I could care less what Dwight thought. Oh, if it were only her on this trip with me instead of old Dwight.

And then I hear a different sound coming from the river. I look up and see three deer crossing! A doe and two fawns moving slowly through the silver water. The fawns restless and jumpy with the water up to their bellies; the doe doesn't look at them. They cross to the other side, climb up the bank, and disappear into the woods. I stare at the place where they disappeared, and I want to follow them. I want to see them again. Now I know for sure that this really is a wilderness trip--just like Uncle Bob said.

After a while, I walk back towards the camp and soon I can see Dwight sitting in the smoky orange glow of the fire. Where I'm standing it's cold, and the leaves are silver with the moon. Dwight is jabbing at the fire with a stick, still trying to get it to become leaping orange flames. He thinks he's so tough. It would be fun to scare him and see how tough he really is.

I sneak around the camp through bushes so that I'm now upstream from Dwight instead of down. He'll never expect me to be on this side of the camp. I'm hiding behind a bush, but I can see him sitting by the fire. I reach for a small dead branch on the shrub and snap it loudly. Dwight quickly turns around, and he seems to be staring right at me, but I know he can't see me. I break another branch and then I mumble very lowly and softly with my hand over my mouth. Dwight jumps up and looks downstream, in the direction I first left him. Finally he calls out in a shaky voice, "Is that you, Glen?"

I can hardly keep from laughing. He's trying to be so cool, but I can tell from his voice that he's shitting his pants. I snap another branch and his head jerks like it's tied to a rope in my hand.

"Well, I'm going to bed, Glen!" he says in a very loud voice, as if he's trying to scare away a bear. "I'm putting the fire out!"

Then I start laughing and step out from behind the bush. "Did I ever have you scared!" I call out.

He stares at me with eyes as big as two full moons. Finally, when he sees that it actually is me, he says, "I knew it was you all along. You didn't scare. . .scare me."

"I saw three deer crossing the river."

"I wasn't scared, Glen. I was just playing along."

"It was a doe and two fawns."

"You might of thought I was scared, but I knew it was you--who else would be down here? Let's build up this fire."

We throw some more branches on the fire, but they aren't really dry. The fire spits and cracks, rises and falls as we add whatever paper we can find. If Dwight wouldn't of picked such a lousy place to camp we'd probably have a roaring fire now. But there are no big trees here, so there are very few dead branches that are big enough to burn.

We are quiet for a long time, then I say, "Do you know what happened in the Vietnam War?"

"Why?" he says.

"Well, I was thinking about the deer I saw--"

"What deer?"

"The three deer I saw! A doe and two fawns."

"No way. Where?"

"Downstream. They were crossing the river."

"Should of had a rifle."

"But now when I think of the deer I keep thinking about that movie Deer Hunter."

"I never saw it," Dwight says. "What's it about?"

I don't want to explain it. "Vietnam," I say. All kinds of scenes from the movie are flashing in ~~my mind~~--the steel pistol against a sweaty temple, the dark alleys and piles of dollar bills, the muddy brown river with rats, and a rifle aimed between the eyes of a buck high in the mountains. It's making me nervous and sweaty, and I want to get the images out of my head, but I can't. Those three deer crossing the river looked so beautiful, and now all I can think of is that movie.

Dwight kicks at one of the smouldering branches. "You should come to our cabin this fall," he says. "Every fall we go hunting and four-wheel driving. It's just a gas. We get way into the back country in our four-by-four, spinning in the mud, flying through swamps. Last time we were in mud that covered our wheels, and we had to use the winch. . .We have dirt-bikes and snowmobiles at the cabin too. I bet you'd love it there."

Suddenly there's the sound of an engine again. We look up and see headlights coming towards us! Across the open field behind the willows. Closer and closer, the light shining in our eyes. We sit paralyzed. The lights go off and a tall woman gets out of the truck or Jeep. She walks towards us.

"How you doing tonight?" she says. She has long black hair and is wearing a tank top and shorts, and as she approaches I can see that she's pretty old--maybe 19 or something. It's hard to tell in the dark, and when girls get older you can never really tell if they're 18 or 26 or 30 anyway. It's not like telling a grade sixer from a grade niner.

Dwight and I stand up. "How did you get here?" I say, wanting her to quickly leave by the same way.

"In my Jeep."

"But there's no roads."

"Who needs roads," she says with a big smile.

Even though I'm scared and upset, I can't help but notice how good-looking she is. She looks like a model or an actress.

Dwight notices too 'cause he talks in a voice that's lower than his natural one. "What's it like four-wheeling in this country?" he asks.

"Not bad," she says, flinging back her long hair and then looking around at our camp real casual. "So, on a canoe trip, eh? Having fun? This is really a terrible camping spot you have here. Of all places, why did you choose this swamp?" She looks at our feeble fire. "Won't get a good fire going here. . .I used to canoe on this old river. Used to go with my grandfather all the time." She sits on the ground by the fire and says, "Mind if I sit?"

"No, go ahead," Dwight says in his new voice.

"Yeah, when I went with my grandfather the river was still worth canoeing," she continues. "It was quiet then. . .and wild. At least wilder than it is now. Course even then it wasn't ideal.

But now it's completely useless. I wouldn't set a foot in that water now, let alone a canoe." She stretches her legs towards the fire and they look like bronze.

"It isn't that bad," I say. "There's lots of good things about it."

She looks at me and smiles. Her eyes are black and shiny. "It's even worse," she says. "It's as bad as it could be. Bulldozers, dirt-bikes, and Jeeps--you can see I've joined them. . . No one should be on this river anymore. No one."

"But it isn't that bad," I insist. "It's still quiet here. It's still wild. Look at the moon, and didn't you see that pink sunset, and if you would of seen those deer crossing the river--"

"Shut up," she says in a flat voice. "Just shut up, okay." She pulls an ugly mean face and then says, "It just isn't the same without him around." She glares at me and then gets up and walks towards our canoe, which we still haven't pulled all the way up on shore. Dwight and I stay by the fire and watch her. Why is she barging in like this? Why doesn't she leave? She picks up the bow of the empty canoe and looks at the bottom. "Nice keel," she calls to us. And then when she's setting it down she slips backwards and falls. The canoe slides into the river and immediately starts floating downstream.

"Hey!" I yell. "Our canoe!"

She is sitting on the ground, watching. Dwight and I chase after the canoe, running down the path I was just on, but we come to a steep ridge that runs right down to the water and the canoe moves towards the middle of the river.

The strange girl is behind us, and before we jump in to swim after the canoe, she says, "Quick, let's take my Jeep! We can catch it around the next bend."

We look at her. The canoe is already out of sight, so we run back to her Jeep and jump in. She revs up the engine, slams it in reverse, and soon we're climbing a steep desert hill.

"I'm awful sorry, guys," she says. "I don't know what happened. I slipped on something and the next damn thing I knew the canoe was gone."

"It's okay," Dwight says. "We'll get it back. Don't worry."

We start bouncing down the other side of the hill, and we can see the river lit by the moon, but no canoe.

"It must be around the next bend already," she says. "We better get the hell downstream." She turns around and drives away from the river.

"Where you going?" I shout.

Dwight laughs, nervously. "What's the matter, you scared, Glenie Boy?"

She smiles at Dwight and puts an arm around him. "I like you," she says to him. "You're a true outdoor sportsman. . .Have you ever thought of doing commercials for cigarettes or beer?"

I can see that Dwight isn't sure what she means. I'm not sure either, but it sounds stupid to me. She doesn't belong here, with this noisey Jeep.

"Yeah, I've thought about it," Dwight says, "but how would I get into it?"

"Oh, it's simple," she says. "A guy like you'd have no trouble."

We are driving down an old bumpy road for what seems like a long time. Finally she veers to the right and we're bouncing across an open field. We come up to some buildings--old log cabins. The river is right behind them. She shuts off the engine. We jump out and run to the water's edge. The river is dark and still. There is no sign of the canoe.

"It'll be a while," she says. "See these old log cabins? My great-grandfather built them in the beginning of the century. My grandfather lived here when he was a kid. Used to come here with him all the time. This is where you guys should camp, not in that bloody mosquito bush you were in."

I glance at the log cabins, but I'm afraid the canoe might drift by us, so I quickly bring my eyes back to the river.

"Don't worry," she says. "The canoe'll be here in half an hour or so."

"You dropped it in on purpose!" I suddenly blurt out, almost crying.

"What was that?" she says angrily. "Do you value your. . ." But she stops and looks at me with those dark eyes that hold me in a trance. She takes my hand into both of hers and squeezes. I didn't know women could have such strong hands.

"Why?" I manage to say. "Why did you ruin our trip? Why don't you leave us alone?"

"Grandpa would have liked you," she says softly.

I just look at her. She is very tall.

"Should we make a fire by the river while we wait?" she says.

"That's an excellent idea!" Dwight says in his stupid manly voice.

"What are your names?" she asks.

"Mine's Dwight."

Why should I tell her.

"I'm Vivian," she says. "And you're Glen, right?"

"How do you know?"

"Your buddy called you Glenie Boy, so I guess that makes your name Glen, right?"

"Maybe."

"Let's get some firewood," she says.

"Let's go!" Dwight says, extending his arm to put around her waist, but not daring to actually touch her.

We walk to the nearby bushes where there are huge cottonwoods and old poplars. Dwight says, "Hey, Vivian! You know what happens in the bushes, don't you?"

"No, I don't, Dwight. Why don't you tell me."

"Well, put it this way, it isn't the safest place for a girl."

"Are you a girl? Dwighty Girl." She laughs.

Dwight glares at her, but, of course, he doesn't know what to say.

We carry big dry branches back to the log cabins and drop them beside the river. Dwight walks upstream. I guess he doesn't want a fire after all. He sits down and watches the river.

Vivian looks at me again, and says, "How did you end up with someone like that for a companion on a canoe trip?"

"He's my cousin," I say.

"I wish you could've met my grandpa. You would've liked him." And then I see that she's crying. "He was wild about this river," she says, "and I was, too, when I was with him." She wipes at her tears with the back of her hand and smiles. "He knew everything there was to know about this river. You shoulda seen him handle a canoe."

"Well, why do you bomb around in a Jeep now, instead of--"

"Let's make this fire," she says. "Do you have some matches?"

I check my pockets. "No, they're still at our camp."

Dwight is walking back to us, so I ask him if he has a match.

"Of course not," he says. "Why don't you ask Miss Stuck-up here? She must have a lighter in her hot little Jeep."

I look at Vivian. She is staring at Dwight and she doesn't look too happy. Finally, she says, "Yeah, I'll go get my lighter."

Dwight and I watch the river for the canoe, but suddenly we hear the Jeep being started. We run around the log cabins and the Jeep is halfway across the field already, taillights bouncing.

"Hey!" Dwight yells. "What about us! What about us, bitch!"

I walk back to the river so we don't miss our canoe, but I'm thinking it, too, "What about us? What are you doing to us? Why did you tell me all that about your grandpa and the river?"

Eventually Dwight joins me at the river's edge, and we wait and wait, but there is no sign of a white canoe.

"What a bitch," he says. "A big tease. How are we supposed to get back to our camp? We've got nothing here."

And then the white canoe peaks its head around the bend. It comes down the river broadside, drifting lazily in the flickering moonlight on the dark water. We rip off our sweaters and pants and both get in the freezing water to make sure we don't miss it. The old boat floats into our arms like a giant trout, exhausted and slowly being reeled in. We drag it way up on shore, and then, cold and shivering, we dry ourselves off with our sweaters and put our pants and runners back on.

"Now what?" Dwight moans. "We're lost, and how are we gonna get anywhere without paddles and gear? We don't even have matches!"

"We might as well sleep inside one of these cabins tonight," I say.

Inside it is very dark. We stumble into a room in the back where the moon is shining through a window frame.

"Look, Dwight! An old bunk bed. . .And even a couple of old blankets! I bet they're hers." The blankets are piled on the top bunk and they are dusty and full of holes, but they'll keep us warm.

In the morning I stumble out of the cabin feeling stiff. It's strange to think that her great-grandfather built this thing so many years ago and it's still here. Unless she was lying. But the old cabin is spooky and wonderful at the same time, and somehow I believe her. She's right about the camp--that's for sure. This is a much better camp than the one Dwight chose.

Outside it is cold, but the sun's already blazing and the sky is perfect blue. I look around and then--I can't believe it!--all our camping gear is in a neat pile beside the cabin! How did it--How did she. . .I touch the gear to make sure it's real. And then I discover a note, under the string of our rolled up pup-tent. It says: "Glen, here are the matches." And inside the note is a pack of matches.

Quickly I turn to wake up Dwight, but then I think, no, I'd rather he stay asleep. I take the matches and walk to the pile of dead branches beside the river. Soon I have a fire going, and the warmth enters my body after a long cold night. The morning is so still. So still. And then I see a great blue heron across the glassy river. It is standing in the water, right at the edge. Its beak is pointing up to the sky, but it does not move an inch; it looks like a statue. And then, for no reason at all, it opens its wide purple wings and pushes up, clearing the water in one leap, one gentle step. It stretches out its neck as the big wings pull, slowly. And then, circling downstream the legs tuck in, and it gains speed. Turning above the desert hills, it disappears.

I listen to the fire and the water. The fire is crackling and jumping, and you can hear the moving water along the shore. The curve in the river looks like a giant smile and the sun is in it. I see and hear these things, but right now they don't make me happy at all. I want to talk to her, to listen to her stories, but I know I will never see her again.

Sight Unseen

I am sitting in my apartment in Winnipeg with a scotch in my hand. My suitcase is beside me, unopened, still packed. It seems as though I am still on the airplane. Or do I only wish that I were? Going where? Anywhere? Back to Edmonton? It is 1:00 a.m., but I do not feel like going to bed, or getting out of this chair, or even moving.

Mrs. Donnelly, why is it that I want to listen to you now, now that I can't? I wish you could explain it to me once more. Maybe then. . .Explain what, though?

When I arrived in Edmonton, a week ago today, I was shocked to hear that Mrs. Donnelly had sold her house and was now living in a senior citizens' home. I only knew her as Mrs. Donnelly who lived next door in the little brown house--the house I spent countless hours in as a child--and I could not, or perhaps would not, picture her as living anywhere else. Mother said that Mrs. Donnelly had simply become too forgetful. She told me that one Sunday evening Father and she dropped in at Mrs. Donnelly's for coffee and discovered potatoes burning on the stove while Mrs. Donnelly was reading peacefully in the living room.

"Couldn't she smell them burning?" I asked.

"Well, I guess not," Mother said. "You know how she insists that we just walk in and shout 'Hello, Mrs. Donnelly'--well, that's what we did. As soon as I was in the porch I smelled something burning, so I dashed to the stove. They had just begun to burn."

"What did she say about it?" I asked.

"She said that she had already eaten and she didn't possibly know who could have put those potatoes on. It's just as well, though--that she's in a senior citizens' home. She was getting too old to live all alone. Who knows what kind of catastrophe might have happened. The whole house could have burned down because of her forgetfulness. And it probably would have taken ours down with it."

If I had been there I would have told Mrs. Donnelly to put such nonsense as selling and moving out of her head. I would have told her that she was not going anywhere. She, of course, wouldn't have listened to me, but I would have told her just the same. She belongs in that little brown house, not on the fourth floor of an institution.

The second day I was in Edmonton my mother and I went to visit Mrs. Donnelly. Suite 417, at the end of a long hallway. The building made me nervous; it was far too big. I hadn't been in

Edmonton for over five years, and I had this strange fear that Mrs. Donnelly might have forgotten who I was. But she hadn't.

"William!" she screeched when we got to her suite. "Come in, come in. Look at you, my boy--you're a grown man!"

I was twenty-four and quite "grown" when I moved to Winnipeg, but perhaps she thought I had left at a younger age.

She looked much the same--a little older maybe. But she was still big and chubby, for which I was very glad. Her health always seemed to rise and fall in proportion to her size. She had a big round head with thick curly grey hair. She hugged me with her flabby arms and held my head in her fat hands to kiss me on each cheek. Her blue eyes danced and glistened. We were both very happy--I'm sure I was beaming like an idiot. I had no idea that my emotions would rush up and burst as they did. I had tears in my eyes, and then Mrs. Donnelly cried outright.

The suite was far too small--a small living room, bedroom, and kitchen nook. It seemed all wrong--too clean and modern. Some of the wallpaper was pastel pink with faint lines of soft green, and the carpet was dusty rose. And if you know Mrs. Donnelly, these colors are not for her; she has lived her entire life among bright reds and blues and yellows and earthy browns and greys. She had obviously tried to offset the banality of her suite by hauling in a lot of things from her old home--the Blake prints, the prairie landscape paintings done by her late husband, the blue chair, the oak coffee table, and the oak cabinet, with the black and white picture of her husband at twenty-one. He was a tall, lanky man, with a bushy blond mustache. In the picture he is standing in front of their little brown house, proud and confident. He died of TB during their first year of marriage. Mrs. Donnelly never remarried. She's 81 now.

She sat us in her tiny living room. The view from the window overlooked a small park with tall grey apartment buildings on the other side. It reminded me of my apartment in Winnipeg--the view that is. My mother, who occasionally visited Mrs. Donnelly out of a sense of duty, I'm sure, offered to make some coffee.

"So William, how are you doing in Winnipeg?" Mrs. Donnelly asked.

"Not bad. We just started an interesting new project--studying levels of pollution in the Red River."

"Good. But I'm asking about you, William, not your company. How are you doing?"

I could only laugh; I had obviously forgotten a few things about Mrs. Donnelly.

"Mrs. Donnelly, is your coffee-maker still broken?" my mother asked.

"No. I don't think it's broken--I use it all the time."

"Well, look here. It's exactly like it was last time I was here, and it didn't work then." She showed Mrs. Donnelly how the red light inside the on/off switch didn't work.

"Maybe you're bad luck," Mrs. Donnelly laughed.

Mother looked upset. She was never overly fond of Mrs. Donnelly.

"We can get some coffee downstairs if you need it," Mrs. Donnelly said.

When I was a kid I spent a great deal of time at Mrs. Donnelly's place. Almost every day after school, my younger sister, Cindy, and I would go to visit her. She worked in the public library, but she was always home by the time we got to her place. Mother never liked us going there, but I think she was helpless to stop us. If she tried we would put up such a fuss, saying how would you like to be old and all alone and not have any visitors? We said that Mrs. Donnelly needed us. She depended on us. Mother usually gave in, and if she didn't we would shout until Father would say, "Let them go, for heaven's sake!"

Her home was dark with the deep brown of stained wood, even the walls were stained wood. Every room had something that fascinated Cindy and me. There were wooden toys in the spare bedroom, and in a closet downstairs were old clothes her husband used to wear. She would let us wear them whenever we wanted--old grey hats, wool suits, checkered vests of dusty gold and brown, red paisley ties, yellow shirts that were once white. Her entire house had a kind of musty old smell that mingled with a smell of spices. She liked smelly, spicy, herbal things. If she served us tea it would be rose-hip or black currant. At first the smells bothered Cindy and me so much that we never stayed long, and if we did stay for tea we usually asked to have it in the backyard. But we grew to love the old musty smells and the smells in our own house began to bother us, a terrible combination of Tide and Mr. Clean and Irish Spring and Palmolive.

And Mrs. Donnelly always had better snacks than Mother. If Mother had kool-aid and cookies, Mrs. Donnelly would have fresh raspberry juice and chocolates. She would have us sit in her living room, and then she would set large glasses of juice on the coffee table in front of us. Then she would come out with a tray of chocolates or pastries or squares and set that on the table as well. She never said, "Just one each," or "Two and no more." She just left the tray there, and there was something about her manner that made us behave with discretion. We never attacked the tray. We would carefully sip our juice, while eyeing the chocolates the whole time, until one of us would finally say, "Mrs. Donnelly, may we have a chocolate, please?" She would laugh and say, "Of course. They're for my guests." In time, though, we became more and more courageous and would sometimes start on the chocolates or pastries without asking her. But she wasn't blind. If we were reaching for our third or fourth chocolate, she would get up and in one casual motion she would pick up the tray and say, "Shall I read you a story now?" Then she would walk to the kitchen and slip the tray of goodies into her fridge and come back with a book.

We would sit on her couch--Cindy on one side of her and I on the other--and she would carry us away with stories by A.A. Milne and C.S. Lewis and Hans Andersen and later by Dickens and Hawthorne and Twain and scary stories by Poe and later stories by Ethel Wilson and Flannery O'Connor and Hemingway and Ross and Munro. She would often tell us to read, read, read.

But when I took some of her books home as a child I remember I brought them back the next day and told her the stories were better when she read them. And she said, "Will you have me read to you when you're a man as well?"

"Yes," I said.

She laughed and said, "I can't read to you all of your life, William. One day you'll get married and move away."

I think I told her to quit talking such foolishness. I had no intention of moving anywhere, except maybe into her little house with her.

Sometimes when we came to her place after school we would find her sitting at the kitchen table reading her Bible. But she would never read from it to us because she said our mother would get upset. And I knew that that was true. Mother often said that she would let us go to Mrs. Donnelly's, but if Mrs. Donnelly started reading from her Bible or if she started saying funny things about Jesus we were to get up and walk straight home. Well, this of course only piqued my curiosity. I wanted to discover what this mysterious, forbidden book was all about. So, one day when Mrs. Donnelly was in the living room with Cindy, I sneaked to the kitchen and paged through her Bible. It was a great disappointment, though.

All I remember seeing were a lot of long, foreign-sounding names. It seemed much more boring than the books Mrs. Donnelly read to us, so I quietly put it back in its place and went to the living room.

When I sat down beside Mrs. Donnelly, she said, "Was it interesting, William?"

"What?"

"Your explorations."

"I wasn't snooping around your house," I said.

After that day I concluded that the Bible was probably something only for very old people--people who didn't get bored so quickly. In fact, when I was much older I didn't change my opinion much--I knew that Bible-reading was great for Mrs. Donnelly. I knew it did her good. But I could never get into it. . .maybe when I'm old and grey.

I remember Mrs. Donnelly would sometimes stand at her front door and simply stare out at the neighbourhood. You could call her then and she wouldn't hear you. It was as if she was listening for something, or expecting something miraculous to appear before her any second. Or maybe she was just checking out the neighbourhood, her neighbourhood, making sure all was in order. She often told us that she loved that neighbourhood, the three-bedroom bungalows with sparkling stucco, the white picket fences, the lawns with spruce trees or elms or maples in one corner. I could never detect anything outstanding about that area of town (or that town, for that matter), but she loved it like a maritimer loves the ocean, or a farmer loves the open sky.

When I got to high-school age I discovered that she often went for walks very late at night, around 2:00 a.m. I discovered it quite by accident because at that time I had very little to do with her. In fact, I stayed clear of her. There was something about her that annoyed me then. I think maybe it was her scratchy voice, or maybe her clumsy, heavy movements, or her messy grey hair. Anyway, I discovered her nocturnal wandering when I was being dropped off from a party. She was about two houses down from her own.

"Mrs. Donnelly!" I shouted much too loudly. "Wait for me!"

She stopped and looked back. I was very tipsy, which probably explains why I had forgotten that it was my intention to stay clear of her. I ran after her as best as I could.

"Where you going?" I slurred.

"Why do you ask, William?" she said softly.

"Cause I want to know, that's why. Is there anything wrong with wanting to know? Tell me, is there?"

"No." And I remember that I could see nothing in her face--it was cold and blank.

"Don't you call me your best friend?" I blurted. "Don't you, dammit? Well I want to know as your best friend where are you the hell going goddammit hell. . .Fuuuck."

She said nothing.

"Won't you tell me?" I pleaded.

"I'm going for a walk," she said.

"I can see that! I'm not blind!—Did you think I was blind?"

She stared at me.

"Can I come with you?" I said in a quieter tone. "I don't feel very good."

She looked at me with her stone blue eyes. She had never seen me drunk before. Finally she said, "Okay. Come on."

I remember thinking that she walked at a very fast pace for an older woman who was by no means slim or fit. I stumbled after her. She didn't say anything for a long time. When I began to feel slightly sobered by the cool night air, I said, "Why do you take these walks?"

"I like to listen to the city," she said.

"What's to hear?"

"The quiet, sleeping city--it's much more interesting than the racket of the day."

"Do you pray on these walks?" I asked.

"What do you mean by prayer?"

I laughed at her. "How the hell should I know? You're the one who prays and reads the Bible, not me."

"I'm sorry to hear that, William. So, you have no idea what it means to pray?"

"Talking to your christ-almighty father. The big guy in the sky."

She said nothing then.

"Mrs. Donnelly, why are you so weird? Going for walks at two in the morning--I can't help it, it just seems so ridiculous."

"No one's asking you to help anything."

"You're afraid, aren't you? You use your religion as a crutch because you're bloody scared of the truth."

"Why don't you go home, William."

"But--"

"Go," she said. "Leave me alone now."

When I looked at her stern, wrinkled face under the streetlight I immediately turned and left her. I went to my parents' house--the place where I slept and ate. At that time I didn't consider it home. I was sixteen, in grade 11.

The next day I felt miserable. I couldn't even remember what I had all said to her, but I knew it was bad. And yet I didn't want to go and apologize to her; I didn't want to see her ever again. But I did go to her place, that same day. I thought she'd be upset, but she was only quiet and pensive like the night before. She said I shouldn't apologize for what I am, but rather I should change what I am.

"I'm not apologizing for what I _am_," I said. "I'm apologizing for what I did to you."

"You did nothing to me."

I left her place feeling no better than when I came, but somehow that event led me to start visiting her again on a rather regular basis. She seemed to, or perhaps pretended to, forget about my drunken verbal abuse that night, and I never brought it up again. We became good friends once more.

When I got to university I let her down again by going into Biology instead of English--her favourite subject. I no longer lived with my parents, so I didn't see Mrs. Donnelly quite as much. But when I did come to visit her we always had fun together. She was eccentric as ever. One day in August I walked into her backyard to find her in the garden, picking beans. Older people need not look disgusting in a bathing suit, but Mrs. Donnelly did. She was wearing a white bathing suit that matched the color of her skin, and on her head was a bright red sun-hat. Bent over in the garden she looked like a mound of cottage cheese or vanilla ice cream with a strawberry sliding off to one side. The bathing suit was too small and her fat legs and arms bulged out uncomfortably. Her heavy breasts were being squashed. I was about to quickly turn away out of respect for my elders, but she saw me.

"William, honey!" she called out. "How nice to see you." She walked up to me. "How are your studies going? Are you reading any good books? You haven't forgotten about all the books we used to read together, have you?"

"Mrs. Donnelly, what are you doing in that?" I pointed to her bathing suit.

"You don't like it? I'm getting a tan."

"What for?"

"Because I've never had one before," she beamed.

That night we had a barbecue at Mother's and Father's, and Mrs. Donnelly asked me to rub Noxema on her sunburnt back and shoulders.

"I'll do it," Mother quickly said.

"No," I said. "She asked me. I'll do it."

It was late afternoon when my mother and I got up to leave Mrs. Donnelly's home within the senior citizens' home. Across the park the apartment buildings were turning a pinkish-orange with the last long sun rays of a clear cold February evening. Apartment windows were beginning to glow. I didn't want to leave, although I wouldn't have complained had Mother left on her own. She had kept the afternoon conversation within the rigid boundaries of niceness.

"When do you eat supper around here?" I asked Mrs. Donnelly.

"Five-thirty."

"Why don't we go out for supper?" I said.

"Not me," Mother said, "I have to get home to your father."

"What do you say, Mrs. Donnelly? Would you like to go out for supper with me?"

"I'd love to, William. We'll have a wonderful time--just the two of us."

"Great! I'll drive Mother home and pick you up right away. Where should we go? Downtown? Walden's? The Four Seasons? The Chateau Lacombe?"

"There's that nice little place on Jasper--what's it called? Michael's?"

"That's been gone for twenty years," Mother said. "That 'little place' is now the Principal Plaza."

"Oh, don't be silly," Mrs. Donnelly said. "We can go anywhere we want. What do you suggest, William?"

"How about the Chateau Lacombe?"

"I've never been up there."

"No? Oh, you'll love it. High above the city. It's a revolving restaurant."

"Does it revolve very quickly?"

I laughed. "No, no, you hardly notice it."

When Mother and I got in the car, she said, "I hope you realize that Mrs. Donnelly isn't all there."

"Where?"

"Upstairs, I mean. She doesn't have it all together upstairs." She pointed to her head. "She's a touch disturbed, a bit crazy. And you're so gullible you fall for everything she says. I'm surprised you're not some kind of religious fanatic yet. You know, I think you're happier to see her than you are to see your parents."

I thought so too, but I didn't say anything. Mother had to have her say.

"I mean, don't get me wrong," she continued, "Mrs. Donnelly is a very good person. She's been a good neighbour. But don't forget that she's 81 now. She's getting old--her mind isn't what it used to be. Though God knows she's always been a bit crazy. . .Who wouldn't be, I guess, with their husband dead after one year of marriage."

"Would you be?" I asked.

"What?"

"Would you be a little crazy if Father had died after your first year of marriage?"

"Don't be morbid," she said.

"You brought it up."

"Well, your father is hardly dead, now, is he?"

We drove the rest of the way in silence.

When I got back to Mrs. Donnelly's suite she was still getting ready, clipping pearl earrings on. She was wearing a bright red dress with white lace around the neck and wrists.

"Mrs. Donnelly, you look wonderful in that dress," I said.

"Thank you, William."

She went to get her coat, and I noticed that she didn't walk the way she used to. She shuffled now, rather than the heavy stomping she used to do around her old house.

"Well, come on," she said, "Aren't you going to help me with my coat?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry," I laughed.

"If you're going to take me out, you've got to do it right."

"You're absolutely right. I'm going to spoil you."

"I didn't say anything about spoiling. Why should I want to be spoiled. . .like soggy, stinking vegetables? You flatter yourself, William. I just said do it right, proper--as a gentleman should."

"Oh, I'm no real gentleman."

Then suddenly she took her soft leather purse and swung it around to hit me squarely in the back. "Then I shan't go out with you," she said.

I was trying to cope with my shock when I saw the faintest smile on her face. Then we both laughed. I had forgotten how she loved to play games, how she always encouraged us to dress up and put on skits for her, or puppet shows.

"Shall we proceed?" she said in mock haughtiness.

I opened the apartment door in a wide, showy manner. "After you," I said.

She marched out (it was really just a variation of her shuffle) with her nose in the air.

By the time we got to the top of the Chateau Lacombe we abandoned our game of chivalry. It was only fun when there was no one else around. Besides, Mrs. Donnelly was a little queasy about our altitude.

"I can handle riding up to my fourth-floor home," she said, gawking out at the city lights, "but this is too much. Is there any air up here?"

"You're breathing aren't you?" I said.

"Barely."

"Well, that still counts."

The maitre d' led us to a small table next to the window. We gazed at the endless lights far below.

"This would be a good place to die," Mrs. Donnelly said, smiling. "Up here in the sky. . ." She appeared to contemplate this possibility and then said, "Perhaps I'll wait for my dinner and then fall face first into it--dead."

"If you do it, I will too," I said.

We laughed and stared some more at the glittering view of the city. I pointed out some of the university buildings.

After another silence, I said, "You see you can hardly notice that we're turning. I think it takes over an hour to do a full circle."

We ordered our meals--Rainbow Trout for Mrs. Donnelly and Chicken Cordon Bleu for me. We also ordered a half litre of white wine. There was a small candle burning inside a jar on our table.

"Are you lonely in Winnipeg?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Well, what do you do about it? You don't sit around and sulk I hope."

Rather than look at her, I watched a stream of red taillights below.

"William, when are you going to take some action? When are you going to fill yourself with something?"

I told her that I had acted. I told her about the girlfriend I had in Winnipeg for almost a year, and about how I suddenly broke it off because it didn't feel right.

When I finished telling her all about this past relationship, she said, "That story's about as meaningful as this fork. It doesn't answer my question."

"Well, I have a question for you, too," I said. "Why did you never remarry?" I had never asked her anything about her husband before this, and she had never said anything except how and when he died.

She looked at me with her pale blue eyes and finally said, "I don't know. I guess I never met anyone that interested me."

"Did you look?"

"Not especially."

"Didn't you get lonely in that little house? You were what? Only twenty-one."

"I was lonely at first, but it went away. When I think about him now I can't even say whether or not I loved him. I don't think I really did. I was very young and ignorant. Do you know that I hardly read a single book until after he died--including the Bible."

"You didn't? But. . .how? How did you make all those changes?"

"I was determined. I wasn't going to let his death be my end. But what about you, William? What will you do?"

"I don't want to go back to Winnipeg, and yet I know I will. There's nothing for me there. All that I have is right here, and yet I know that I'll leave this behind. Why is that, Mrs. Donnelly?"

"When you're in Winnipeg, all you'll have will be there."

"But--"

"Do you remember when you were a little boy and you brought your friend Robbie over to visit me?"

"Not really."

"Remember you wanted to show him everything about my house--the closet downstairs full of old clothes, and the oak cabinet, and that old radio, and the shelves of books, and the puppets I gave to you and Cindy? And remember that he laughed at your puppet--what did you call it?"

"I don't remember."

"Oh, come on! That big puppet with the big eyes. Don't you remember your friend Robbie laughed at it because the eyes were so big and the mouth and nose were so small?"

"No."

"And then you punched him in the chest for laughing, and after that you didn't like the puppet much and rarely played with it."

"But what does this have to do with me going back to Winnipeg?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I suppose. It hurt me to see you abandon the puppet I made for you, and all because of what your friend said."

"But that isn't fair, Mrs. Donnelly. I was a kid. I was probably getting too old for that puppet anyway."

"Well, then I hope you've learned since then how to receive a gift, but I have my doubts." Her big grey head was shaking, and then she leaned over and blew out the little candle on our table. I can still see her face now. It was jagged stone with glowing blue eyes; it had the look of pain and sorrow and anger.

It is 7:30 a.m., and I'm staring out of my living room window. I can see the faintest suggestion of pink light behind the Winnipeg skyline. It grows into morning light. And it is coming from behind the grey apartment buildings, around the corners and over the roofs, through the bare trees in the park.

I should unpack.